

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET stories



BRITISH EDITION
9

WHERE THE GODS DECIDE

by James McKimmey, Jr.

In the webbed hands of the expressionless, green-faced ones rests the Screee diamond. Some say it's a fabulous diamond; some an emerald; some a ruby—but wily Caine knew it was death.

GAMA IS THEE!

by Stanley Mullen

On Venus, if one rings a doorbell, or bangs on a locked gate at night, it is adventure. You never know who . . . or what . . . will answer your summons. The door swings slowly open and you brace yourself to look. Will it be maid—or monster—or both?

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PLANET STORIES

No. 6

British Edition

Two Star-flung Novelets

WHERE THE GODS DECIDE

James McKimney, Jr. 4

In the webbed hands of the expressionless, green-faced ones rests the Screece gem. Some say it's a fabulous diamond; some an emerald; some a ruby—but wily Caine knew it was death.

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From out beyond the sun he came, a fugitive from a dead and sterile world . . . seeking solace, friends, a home, on Earth—a planet holding even greater terrors.

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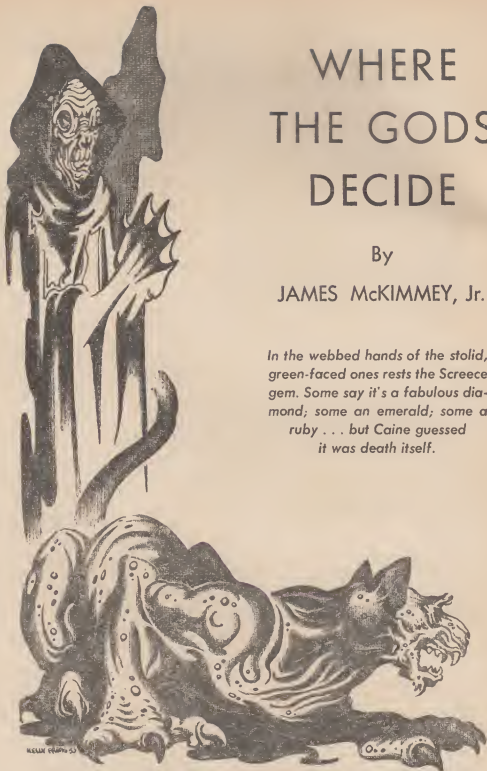
They claimed the Ceregraph transferred only knowledge, not emotions. Out to savage Trygon II soared the transmuted Terran to make the diabolical test.

WHERE THE GODS DECIDE

By

JAMES McKIMMEY, Jr.

*In the webbed hands of the stolid,
green-faced ones rests the Screece
gem. Some say it's a fabulous dia-
mond; some an emerald; some a
ruby . . . but Caine guessed
it was death itself.*





High above the wet plains and muggy jungles, above the slick rocks and shiny leaves, rests a temple. Like most shrines of ancient order its narrowing spires point to the sky. Men, Venusian men, walk quietly through the restricted labyrinth of this temple, green fingers webbed beneath the long sleeves of their gray capes; green faces expressionless beneath the sanctity of their gray hoods. There is movement, and these caped men circle a silver orb that lies in dead center of the golden walls. They pace, each flat step a soundless motion. The green fingers unmesh, spread, and come together again. "Screece," says a flute-like voice. "Screece," says another. The silver orb rests like a cloudy fist-sized tinsel globe, unsparkling, while a dozen minds search out through the vastness of Venus, probing for the cores of evil and purity. Feet pace, faces are immobile, and through the thick air comes a shrill rising scream from the throat of a giant black cat with deep orange eyes. The motion ceases, lidless stares meet. "Grith?" pronounces one. "Grith?" pronounces another. And the pacing continues, while green lips quirk the slightest bit. Minds search . . .

IT WAS that season when the jungle of Venus turned into a vapid, steaming swamp. Sleet buds glistened like long, thin snakes, and leaves hung limp and wet from the vine-trees. Nicholas Caine felt the sweat prickle upon his forehead and slide down the sides of his face. Fairchild, he noticed, was sweating, too, so that the man's shirt had turned dark, and the close-clipped gray hair curled on his head. Only the woman still looked fresh in her white shirt and shorts.

She was standing beside Caine's jetcopter, drinking plain Scotch from a silver glass. Her husband, Fairchild, was drinking, too, as he sat silently in a folding chair beneath the tip of the ship's left wing.

This is going to be a sweet thing, Caine thought, it really is.

The air was dead of breeze, and soggy clouds hung above them like an immense stifling blanket. The man stared at his knees and the woman swirled the Scotch in her glass. Caine kept his palms flat against the arm rests of his chair.

He watched the woman closely. There was too much brightness inside of her, too much nervousness, as though she were burning inside and she had to keep moving, laughing, insulting, enticing, because she was alive with that burning, and she couldn't stop. It wasn't the liquor, Caine knew, because they had just started that, a few minutes after he had brought the ship down.

They were approximately four-hundred miles from the Colony, and in the wild stretches of this Venusian jungle, four-hundred miles was like the distance from day to night. Here was the dark, the strange, the weird and the wild.

Kiitz birds screamed in the distance, and their sound was like the sound a man makes when he is touched by fire. A thick, muddy river went over a cliff above and behind them, hitting transparent rocks with a steady crashing noise that thrummed against Caine's ears like thunder in a distant sky.

Teewh birds with black wings and curling yellow beaks came out of the sultry sky and skimmed the tips of the trees surrounding the clearing. They screeched when they dove, and they kept harmony with the unseen stationary kiitz birds. A chilling, nerve-racking harmony.

"WON'T you have a drink with us?" said the woman, her teeth white between her smiling lips.

"Thank you, no," Caine said. The woman tipped her head and watched him. Her eyes were very blue and they mocked Caine and taunted him, while her husband just sat there, drinking and watching his bare knees.

This could go to pieces in a hurry, Caine decided, and he rubbed his palms against the arms of the chair.

Because, on the other hand, the husband was too quiet, too brooding, too deliberately unseeing of the way his wife played with Caine, with her eyes and her movements.

Her legs, Caine noticed, were the kind that would look well bare, as they were, or in nylon beneath a skirt, and she had rather full hips, although not too full. Her breasts, Caine could see, were well enough developed.

She bent to rub a finger against her left knee. "Are there insects in this part of the jungle?" she asked Caine.

"Some."

"But no grith cats?" she said, straightening.

"Not here," Caine said.

"Just where we're going tomorrow?"

"Yes." Caine looked back to the man. He was about fifty, Caine judged, at least twenty years older than the woman. His face was lean and sad, and there were thin lines traveling out from the corners of his eyes and mouth that contrasted with the youthful cut of his wiry hair.

These two had come to Caine because his reputation in the Colony was established. He had been flying tourists into the jungle for more than three years, and while he could not predict all of this country, he at least knew the general traits of those sections within a reasonable radius of the Colony.

"Did you ever shoot a grith cat?" the woman asked, looking at Caine over her glass.

"No," said Caine.

"But you've heard that they're pretty horrible and dangerous?"

"Yes." Caine wiped a hand at the sweat on his forehead. The woman was working at the cats, her eyes shifting to look at her husband with every word, to see how he was reacting. So far he had done nothing, said nothing, only sat there and drank.

However, the cats were not the reason the couple were in the Venusian jungle. Hunting animals was a dead sport for them, something done in the past and something which had become boring.

They were looking for bigger game now. The Screece gem. And they had flown all the way from Earth to Mars, from Mars to Venus, to find it. The Screece gem was a myth, Caine was certain, a bit of fantasy out of ancient Venusian lore. But they paid him well for the trip, and he would ask no questions.

The woman stayed with the cats. "How big are these grith cats, Mr. Caine?"

"Eight to ten feet long," Caine said.

"About like a large horse."

"Only they're cats, with the claws and the fangs and all."

"Essentially."

Caine felt himself tightening inside a little. The woman was trying to break

through her husband's armor, because somewhere, sometime, he must have had trouble hunting a cat-like animal. Tiger. Or panther. The Martian frynx, perhaps. But she had not found her target, yet.

The man raised his head and spoke for the first time since they had landed. "How far away is this temple, would you say, Mr. Caine?"

"Fifty miles," Caine said.

"How close to it can we land?"

"Eight or ten miles, I imagine."

"Can't we get closer than that?" the man asked.

"I don't think so," Caine said. "The temple is on top of a fairly sheer rise of land, and I can't put the ship down there. The nearest clearing we'll find will be about eight or ten miles away."

Mrs. Fairchild walked to her chair and sat down. "That means, then, that we'll have to go through that much country where the cats are?"

Caine didn't answer, and the man returned to gazing at his knees. Time moved slowly in the thick wet jungle.

"Show Mr. Caine your scar, Charles," the woman said, her voice sudden out of the silence.

Fairchild picked up his glass from the arm of his chair and held it tightly in front of his waist. The muscles along his bare forearms were ridged and his knuckles paled as he held the glass.

"Don't be bashful," the woman said, smiling. "I'm sure Mr. Caine would like to see what a cat can do."

She looked at Caine as though she were about to tell him a delightfully domestic story that had been, until now, nurtured between just her husband and her. "This was a leopard, Mr. Caine. A long vicious leopard. Mr. Fairchild, you see, didn't hit him right, and so he got Charles from about here," she tapped herself just below the neck, "to here." She touched her waist. "It's a long scar, Mr. Caine. Isn't it, Charles? About three inches wide, and. . ."

The man brought his glass down against the arm of the chair. "Shut up, Janet. I'll tell you nicely. Just shut up!"

"Charles," she said, blinking in exaggerated surprise. "I just wanted to tell Mr. Caine, because he's hunted, too, and while

I don't know if these grith cats are anything like leopards. . ."

The man's eyes had become wide and angry. "I won't tell you again, Janet."

"I'm sorry, Charles." She smiled at him assuringly and blinked again. "We're just excited about tomorrow, I guess, aren't we?"

Fairchild returned his stare to his glass, noticed it was empty, and filled it.

"Can't I interest you in a drink, yet, Mr. Caine?" Mrs. Fairchild said.

"Not right now," Caine said.

"Oh." Her voice pouted. "But I think we should celebrate. Here Charles and I have come all this way to find the Screece gem, and we're sitting within fifty miles of it, and I think we all ought to celebrate."

FAIRCHILD spoke to Caine without raising his head. "Maybe Mr. Caine doesn't really believe in the existence of the Screece gem. Do you, Mr. Caine?" he said, looking up.

Caine took a cigarette from a package in his shirt. "I'm just paid to get you to a temple, not to think."

"You're evading the question," Fairchild said. His eyes were narrow now, and a bit glazed.

Caine lit his cigarette and blew smoke into the damp air. He kept his voice non-committal. "I've heard about it. Everybody in the Colony has heard about it."

"Correction," said Fairchild. "Everybody in the System has heard about it."

"It's a very popular myth," Caine agreed.

The man stood up. "It is not a myth, Mr. Caine. It exists and it's in that temple, do you hear me? There is no damned myth about it, just cold hard fact, and I'm going to find it and take it out of there! Is that clear?"

Caine watched the man's taut figure. He inhaled his cigarette. "I told you, Mr. Fairchild, I'm just paid to fly the ship and I'm not paid to think. I'm responsible for getting you to the temple. That's all.

"Listen," Fairchild said, crossing to Caine and reaching for the front of Caine's shirt. Don't get insolent with me. . ."

Caine slapped the man's hand away.

"Charles!" the woman said.

The man blinked and touched his slapped hand against his chest. "Sorry, Mr. Caine,"

he said, finally. "Didn't mean to fly off that way. Little nervous, you see. All that time in space, searching around this way. We're just this close, and I'm getting too nervous." He turned back to his chair and sat down. His face became very sad again, and the lines about his mouth and eyes seemed deeper.

The woman laughed lightly. "You don't want to pay any attention to Charles when he's this way," she said to Caine. "It's just that this means so much to him, finding the Screece gem. It's worth the wealth of the System, they say, and so Charles has to have it, Mr. Caine. Because he hasn't got any more money."

"For heaven's sake, Janet," the man pleaded.

"Are you ashamed of being poor?" she asked with false concern. She stood up and began pacing back and forth, and Caine noticed the easy way she moved, her hips swaying, the muscles of her long legs rippling. "No, he's not ashamed of being poor," she said, looking at Caine. "He's afraid of it, aren't you, Charles?"

Fairchild tipped his glass to his lips, and when he brought it down, Caine could see that it was empty again.

The man refilled the glass and held it in front of him, looking into it, as though he might find another world there, a peaceful world, where there weren't any cats or beautiful women with reddish hair, a world where there might be peace and no fear. He raised the glass, trying to taste of that world. His eyes were getting filmy.

"I'll tell you why he's afraid of being poor, Mr. Caine," the woman went on. "It's because not only is Charles a yellow punk when it comes to cats, but he's frightened of losing his wife, aren't you, Charles?"

Caine felt himself tensing under the cutting lilt of the woman's voice. He was observing something, he knew, that should have been contained in the seal of marital privacy. But here he was, caught in the middle of it, while the woman swung back and forth, and the man seemed to crumple further into his chair, hanging on to the glass of Scotch, as though that were all he had left to hang on to.

And tomorrow they had ten miles of grith country to span on foot. Sweet, Caine repeated to himself, really sweet.

II

"CHARLES, you see," the woman said, stopping and turning to Caine, "thinks the only way he can hold me is with money. And now he's put every penny he had left into this hunt so that he can find the Screece gem and keep his lovely wife. And do you know what, Mr. Caine?" She placed her hands gently on her hips, and Caine could see the faintest swinging movement in them. "He's right, you see."

Caine remained very silent.

"He *has* to find the Screece gem," the woman said, smiling whitely, "or lovely Janet is gone, slipped right out of his hands. And Charles is just a poor little sheep with gray hair and a two inch scar, who'll be cold and alone, while Janet—"

"Stop it, damn it!" Fairchild said, but he didn't get up and his voice was thick.

"—while Janet," the woman said, her voice even and relentless, "will be sleeping with someone else who can afford her, and poor old Charles will shiver in his damned freezing bed, all alone, thinking about that, wondering who it is, burning up his ancient jealous liver!" The woman whirled to face her husband.

The man tightened both hands around his glass, and Caine could see the whiteness about his mouth. The woman began to laugh, a soft, pealing laugh that got into Caine's brain because of the very softness of it.

She walked back to her chair and lifted her own glass. Her laughter stopped while she drank, and then it started again. She turned to look at her husband, and her eyes danced and her lips curved. Her body shook with the laughter.

"Who do you think it'll be?" she asked her husband. "If you don't find the gem?" She turned to Caine. "Mr. Caine, do you have any money? I mean, perhaps you wouldn't need as much money as Charles. I might make some compensation for verility, you know."

Caine disregarded her. "Mr. Fairchild, we have some rugged country to cover tomorrow. This is your party, of course, but if you keep on drinking. . ."

"If I keep on drinking?"

Caine examined the man's eyes and his

slack mouth. "Nothing," Caine said. "Nothing." At least, he decided, the Scotch might stop the needling and the pressure for the man. He deserved that much, perhaps.

"You didn't answer me, Mr. Caine," the woman said. "About you and me. I'd like you to answer, so that my husband knows before he falls out of his chair, you see."

"I think we all ought to get some sleep," Caine said quietly.

"Mr. Caine, really? So sudden? I'd have to check your bankbook first, of course. Although if you give me your word. . ."

"If you don't mind," Caine said, his voice harsh, "I'd like to be left neutral in whatever you and Mr. Fairchild might have in conflict."

"Oh," she said. "Well, that's just because you haven't seen the full potential. Let me show you what you'd be getting for your money—the way Charles saw it." She raised her glass again, drank, and stood up to cross to the ship. She climbed the ladder to the cabin, very gracefully, and touched the switch of the radio. Music pealed into the warm air.

It was minor music, issuing from the Colony station, music that had been taken from the native Venusian melodies. It had been converted and fitted to the heavy rhythm of Earth's ancient Africa, and it seemed suddenly to become a part of this jungle of Venus.

The woman stood in the doorway, and then she moved down the ladder, as though it were one sliding motion. She remained there, her back against the silver metal of the ship, swaying her hips, moving her shoulders.

"I was a dancer, you see, Mr. Caine. I worked in a very expensive club in Habrill, on Mars. I was very popular and very good, and sweet Charles took me away from it all, didn't you, Charles?"

Fairchild, Caine could see, was having trouble focusing his eyes, but the rhythmic music was heavy in the air and it beat against the ears, and Caine knew that the man was aware of what was happening.

The woman began moving easily toward Caine, her movement a practised swinging motion of hips and shoulders. "This is what Charles took me away from, Mr. Caine, by the gentle touch of gold," she said. "Come

with me,' he said, and he fitted diamonds to my ears and rings to my fingers. 'Let me take you away from the damned searching eyes of every man on Mars. Let me hide you, so no one can see you or touch you, but me, and I'll give you all I own.' Isn't that right, Charles?" she said, looking at him with narrow gleaming eyes.

The man lifted his glass and slowly drained it. He let it fall to the ground with a breaking crunch, while the woman kept time with the rhythm, with her hips and her shoulders, slight swinging motions that only intimidated.

"Only now," the woman said, "poor Charles doesn't have anything more to give, and so here I go again. . . ."

She raised her hands over her head and cracked her palms together. Her hips swung and her shoulders shook. She caught her fingers in her hair, her teeth white and biting, while her whole body shivered. It was a rippling gyration of muscle and pink skin, building, furious.

Fairchild pushed himself out of the chair. His eyes were wild and vacant. "Don't. . ." he said, and his words were meshed together so that it was a hoarse sound, full of anguish.

The woman laughed, a wild laugh that blended with the music and the frenzied movement of her body. She whirled and slapped her hands together and her body quivered.

The man staggered a step forward. "Janet, don't, please. . ." He fell forward, sprawling over the ground. Gradually, the woman ceased her movement, while her laughter rang through the wet jungle.

The gray-caped figures hold motionless around the muddy silver orb. A green head cocks. Another. The golden walls encase them, and only a circular opening near a tip of a spire brings in dim light and a little of the wispy outside vapor. Fingers disengage and a green extends from a gray cape. The hand sweeps in a downward slice, splitting by symbol, purity from evil. A second hand imitates. A third. A dozen. Voices flute to the cloudy orb. A cat snarls. Minds probe.

THE light was dimming, and she was a dark curving figure, standing over the crumpled figure of the man. The music

pounded relentlessly. Caine stood up.

"Each time I make one of these trips," he said, looking at the motionless form of Fairchild, "I promise myself it'll be the last, and I'm promising myself again, right now."

The woman stood silent, and there was just her smiling mouth and the white teeth and the reddish hair. "But this one isn't over, yet, Mr. Caine. We still have a long way to go." Her eyes danced.

"That's right, Mrs. Fairchild," Caine said, bending to lift the man. "Unfortunately, that's right."

He picked the man up while the woman watched, and he carried him to the ship. He climbed to the cabin, working against the surprising weight of the smaller man. For his age, Fairchild was a very tough, sinewy man who looked as though he had spent most of his life fighting through strange and varied wilds, constantly in search of new adventures and thrills.

Caine laid the man across a bunk built into the rear of the ship's cabin. The tip end of the wide scar was visible now, showing above Fairchild's open shirt, and the thin lines about the eyes and mouth were like written entries in his face, telling of too much Scotch and perhaps too much of the reddish-haired woman. All that he lacked, Caine thought wryly, was the empty bank account to show the price he had paid for the love of the devilish woman.

Caine straightened and walked back through the cabin, snapping off the radio.

He jumped to the ground. The light was very dim now, and the woman was only an outline. The screams of kiitz birds were in the air again, and in the distance, the thrumming monotony of the falls.

"You can use the cabin with your husband, Mrs. Fairchild," Caine said briskly. "I'll get some blankets and sleep out here."

"Aren't there animals?"

"Not around here," Caine said. "I'll make a fire. If you want something to eat I'll get it out of the cabin for you."

"No, thank you, Mr. Caine," the woman said, sitting down in her chair. "I'll just enjoy the rest of my drink, if you don't mind."

"It's up to you," Caine said shortly. He was very careful to keep his eyes away from

her. You handled a woman like that best, he knew, by keeping your eyes away from her.

He gathered wood from beneath the wet outer layer of the jungle floor. He bent to light the fire just as the darkness enveloped the clearing. The flames flickered and licked upward, sending their shifting yellow light into the surrounding foliage.

Caine straightened from the fire.

"*Do you like my dance?*" the woman asked, softly.

"*I didn't see it for your husband, Mrs. Fairchild,*" Caine said, and he returned to the ship where he got several blankets. He placed them near the fire.

"*He's not around now,*" the woman said.

Caine looked at her finally. "*He is as far as I'm concerned.*"

"*You're so noble, Mr. Caine.*"

"*I'm not anything,*" Caine said. "*I'm just a guide who gets paid for taking people where they want to go. Nothing more, do you understand, Mrs. Fairchild?*"

"*No,*" she said, smiling at him.

Caine walked to his chair and sat down. "*We have a tough day ahead of us, Mrs. Fairchild, and we'll need all the strength we have to get through that stretch of jungle. This is a different jungle than you've seen before. Venus breeds some terrible country, and where we're going is that kind of country. I haven't been there myself, so I can't even predict what it'll be like. But I've circled it in the ship and it's thick and alive. I don't trust it. So you can stay up, if you like, and I'll be glad to stay awake myself, but I'd advise some sleep right now.*"

Mrs. Fairchild stood up slowly, her fingers drifting over her waist. "*I'll tell you, Mr. Caine. You're not the kind of man I like to argue with. I've had just enough liquor to feel perfectly agreeable to anything, anyway. So I'll get ready for bed, but I'm sorry you didn't enjoy my dance. Let's do this. You wait while I get ready, and then we'll have one nightcap together, a sort of dancing nightcap. Are you interested, Mr. Caine?*"

Caine lit a cigarette slowly, watching the blaze of his lighter. He snapped the lighter shut. "*I'm interested in both you and your husband, Mrs. Fairchild.*"

"*To hell with my husband,*" she said, her teeth showing between her lips. She lifted

her glass and drank all that was in it. "*Relax, Mr. Caine,*" she said, walking toward the ship. "*Enjoy yourself.*"

Caine noticed that the liquor had taken hold of the way she walked, so that she swayed a little, but there was still the grace there and the swing, and it was hard to disregard.

I hope she doesn't come out of there, Caine thought. I hope she just falls asleep and leaves me alone, and that tomorrow goes very quickly and smoothly.

BUT when Caine had watched the flames lick at the settling night for a few minutes and had finished his cigarette, he heard the sound again. The sound of music, muffled by the silver body of the ship. Wilder now, with heavier drums, seasoned into a more biting sound by the night and the flickering flames. Caine was aware of the blood in his veins and the pulse in his temples.

All at once, the door of the cabin was kicked open and the music rose in the air. The woman stood in the doorway, her hands gripping the silver frame tightly. She wore a black nightgown, made of shimmering stuff that was as thin as the fine mist in the air. Her hair had been let down and it fell over her shoulders and her back. Her feet were bare and very white beneath the black gown.

She stood motionless, her fingers tight against the frame, as though holding herself against the music. The melody disappeared then, and there was only the drums, rolling, and finding a punctuation that became all that existed in the night. The woman leaped from the doorway and she touched the ground, wriggling. Her feet were wide-spaced and her hands searched through her hair, lifting it from the nape of her neck. She bent forward suddenly, so that her hair was a reddish swirl against the light of the leaping flames.

She straightened slowly, one hand sliding her hair back, so that Caine could see her eyes dancing with her body, and she began moving toward him, shoulders swinging, hips pivoting. Caine kept his hands tight against the arms of his chair, his eyes narrow. The woman was a writhing movement beneath the black veil-like gown. She twisted and whirled and finally, she stopped in front

of Caine, chin high, one hand still half-thrust through the soft thick hair. Her eyes glowed.

"Nightcap," she said, her voice breathless.

Caine shifted carefully in his chair. "I'm not thirsty," he said.

The woman's hand snapped from her hair, and the relaxed suppleness of her body tightened.

"I remember a man," Caine said through his teeth, "who's a dozen yards away, sleeping in the protection of alcohol, because a cheap burlesque queen is drawing out his blood until he's damned near dead. I can see through the pink skin, Mrs. Fairchild, and what I see makes me sick. You don't interest me at all, and you never will because I don't like the sight of hate and selfishness and just plain rottenness."

She struck him across the face with one hand and then the other. The fury burned in her eyes and her body trembled with it. She struck him again and again, and Caine's face bled where a ring ripped his skin.

He sat very still, his hands remaining against the chair arms. "You've just lost yourself a boy, Mrs. Fairchild. Put your clothes on, we're flying back to the Colony. You can find yourself somebody else for this, because I've had enough."

He started to rise, but she put one hand against his chest, and the fury was gone out of her eyes, and there were tears instead.

"Please," she said, and Caine could hear the tears going into her voice. "I'm sorry. I'm awfully sorry. Let me talk to you first, please." She knelt to the ground and watched Caine while thin tears ran down her cheeks.

"About what, Mrs. Fairchild?" Caine said coldly.

"I don't know why I did what I did," she said, touching at the tears. "Too much Scotch, I think. Only I'm still a dancer and it's in my blood. It isn't cheap burlesque, Mr. Caine. It's something deep inside me and I can't help it."

"Nice trait," Caine said, "for a man's wife."

"I had that coming. I've got a lot coming, only the resentment for his drinking, the way he's tried to own me, keeps coming out and I want to hurt him. I know it isn't right, but it's what I do and I want to stop doing

it. He's worried, and it comes out with what he says and what he does, and so I fight him. He thinks if he doesn't find this gem, he's going to lose me."

"Isn't he?" Caine asked, his eyes thin.

"No," she said quietly. "I'm frightened of him and I feel alone with him. But I won't leave him."

"Like I told you," Caine said, "I'm just a hired man. What my customers think or do between themselves is none of my business."

"You're not that cold," she said, looking into his eyes.

"I'm that cold."

She shook her head stubbornly. "Be kind to me. You can. For just this one moment, when I'm not alone or afraid, when there's just this one moment before tomorrow—when it starts all over again."

Caine didn't answer, but he relaxed in his chair slightly and leaned back.

She smiled at him and it was a warm simple smile with all the hardness and sarcasm erased. "Would you have one drink with me? One small drink to seal the night up, so maybe you won't remember me so badly, so maybe you'll think I've got some heart and human feelings?"

Caine waited, watching her shiny eyes. "One drink," he said.

She smiled and stood up, returning to the side of the ship where Fairchild had set up his portable bar. She poured two glasses, and while Caine watched her, he noticed that in her straight, motionless posture, the animal liveness had disappeared. She was very simple—and naive-looking, and when she returned, he saw that the tears were still wet on her face.

She handed him a glass, and she held her own in the air. "A trite toast—here's to two people who met in the Venus night. . . briefly."

"Two people," Caine repeated, lifting his own glass. The Scotch burned down his throat.

She knelt again and smiled at him. Caine noticed then that the music was still beating into the night air, and that the black gown was still very thin. He turned his glass up again, to hurry through the drink. Even in her simplicity and tears he didn't trust himself.

The Scotch seemed to take hold of his blood and he could feel it racing in his veins.

He lifted the glass a third time, and the hand that held it seemed suddenly detached from his own movement. A singing began in his head and then disappeared, and when he looked at her, the smiling lips were redder and the shining teeth were whiter. The music pulsed in his head, seeming to beat against his brain.

"What . . . ?" he began, and his voice was thick. He shook his head and looked at his glass. It fell out of his hand.

"A little witch's potion," she said, rising. "Something from the Martian caldron. Quick and oh, so effective."

He fought the feeling that caught hold of him. His brain seemed to deaden until there was only the drums inside his head, and his senses became alive and burning. He could see her before him, and she began to sway back and forth, her hands moving in front of her face. He caught hold of the chair arms to keep his own hands from reaching out.

He tried to cling to reason, but his hands wanted to escape. The flames of the fire flickered somewhere in the distance, and in front of him the black-covered body began to move in rippling shivers. The moving pink hands rose in the air, and there was a shimmer of concealed muscles, dancing, dancing.

He clung to the chair, gritting his teeth, but the drums pounded at his senses, over and over, and the lips smiled and the white teeth shone and the pink body moved in time with the drums.

"Not yet?" he heard her say, somewhere far away.

And the body turned slowly, convoluting in a shimmering dance of thin blackness.

Caine lost his grip on the chair, and he was moving his hands. He heard the laughter, high in the air, stinging his ears and he couldn't stop himself. He was listening to the laughter when his fingers touched skin, and there was only blackness after that.

Minds examine. Judge. Decide. "Grith?" says a round voice. Golden bars snap open. A black cat crouches. Green heads nod within their hoods. The cat leaps, crouches

again, and then begins to stalk. Lidless eyes turn to the cold orb. Voices chant. "Grith?"

III

HE AWOKE as a boot caught the side of his head. He rolled across the ground, the pain exploding inside his head. The boot found him again. Another time, above his eyes. He moaned, trying to make his muscles work, but it was as though he were still caught in a nightmare.

"Filthy damned swine," he heard, and his eyes watched a fist come out of the misty air to smash against his cheek. He rolled again, burying his face against the ground, trying to hide, to protect himself until he could find his senses and his coordination.

"You'll kill him." It was a woman's voice, saying this, a lilting feminine voice that was very, very familiar. Caine tensed himself, waiting for the next blow.

"Get up," a man said.

Caine felt the boot against his legs. He turned over slowly and pulled himself to a sitting position. He shook his head, but the thick mist that was in the morning air seemed to have gotten into his brain. His arms and legs felt as though lead had been poured into his veins.

Slowly it came back to him. The woman. The Scotch. He searched the fog-filled area in front of him. Fairchild, his mouth an ugly line, watched him and in his hand was Caine's pistol. The woman was behind Fairchild, still in the black gown, and Caine could see that it was torn.

"I'd kill you right now," Fairchild said, his voice hoarse with rage, "but I want that gem. Get up."

"Darling," the woman said to her husband, while her eyes danced at Caine. "He's such a mess."

Caine tried to swallow and even that was difficult. Every part of his body had been taken hold of by the drug that had been put into his liquor, and each movement was a task he was certain he couldn't complete. He raised a hand slowly to his face and his fingers came away sticky.

"Get up!" Fairchild growled, his eyes vicious thin slits.

Caine got to his knees and fell flat again. He clutched at the ground, waiting for the

crushing boot. It came, and he tried again. He got to his knees the second time and then, inch by inch, he stood up. For a moment it seemed as though his head were floating away from his shoulders, and he looked down at his body, thinking that what he saw surely belonged to someone else, a limp, ragged body, cut and bruised with no clothes. He was falling again.

Fairchild caught Caine's arm and jerked him upright. "I'll give you two minutes to get your damned clothes on, Caine, and get behind the controls of that ship."

He looked at Fairchild stupidly. The man shook him. Caine turned around and searched for his clothes beside the dead fire. He staggered and groped, and twice, blackness covered his eyes and he went to his knees.

Finally, he stood, weaving, clothed haphazardly, and he was vaguely aware that blood was sliding down his chin, dripping onto his jacket. He touched the blood with a finger and it didn't mean anything to him.

The man turned to his wife. "The same goes for you. Get into the cabin!"

"Charles," she pleaded. "He made me drink so much."

"Go on!" Fairchild said, waving the pistol.

She smiled crookedly and walked toward the ship. The mist lay over the jungle so thickly that the ship, not more than ten or twelve yards away, was barely visible. Caine heard the door of the cabin opening and closing.

Fairchild pointed the gun at Caine's stomach again. "You'd better watch every damned step you take," he said. "This gun is going to stay on you until I get that Screece gem, and the only reason you're alive, you bloody louse, is because I have to have it. Do you understand?"

Caine searched for his voice, and it came out thick and strained. "Won't fly you. . ." He watched the man's face whiten, and the gun trembled in Fairchild's hand. Then the gun was swinging through the air and Caine watched it coming until it struck him above the eyes.

WATER dripped from his face and his chest, and he fought for air. His brain was a singing maize of pain, and the numb-

ness in his arms and legs kept him riveted to the ground. He opened his eyes, finally, as he felt himself being dragged across the clearing. The rungs of the ladder leading to the ship's cabin were against him. He moved his head and his teeth struck silver metal. His coordination was gone and he couldn't tell what his movements were going to be.

"Up the steps," he heard Fairchild say behind him.

He lifted his hands, fitting them around the rungs of the ladder, and he began to pull himself up. It was an inching effort. Blood got in his eyes, and his head whirled into far-away spins that had nothing to do with the movement of his body. He hung onto the ladder and climbed one rung, then another. He teetered near the top, and Fairchild pushed him into the cabin where he sprawled.

He could hear Fairchild coming up behind him, and the door slammed shut.

Caine rolled onto his back and looked up. She was standing over him in fresh white shorts and blouse. Her hair now was very neat and groomed, and her pink skin was radiant. She smiled at him, her teeth showing very whitely. "You're a pretty thing, Mr. Caine."

He knew he should have felt the rage then, the instinctive fury for what she had done to him. But the drug had left him with nothing but enough reaction to try to fight for consciousness and strength.

"Clean him up," Fairchild said. "Fast. Then we're leaving."

The woman got soap and water from the rear of the cabin. She washed Caine's face, her fingers cruel against the cuts and swellings. She raked the cuts with stinging medicine, and Caine lay unmoving, trying to let time feed him new strength. She stood up, finally, looking at her husband.

"All right," Fairchild said. "Let's go, Caine."

Caine looked at the man's face, at the set of his mouth. He looked at the gun and then at the man's boots. He pulled himself up and staggered into the seat behind the controls. His movements on the controls were slow and rough. He looked at Fairchild once, as the jets fired into the fog-laden air. "Can't fly this way. No balance,

coordination. Visibility's rotten, I . . ."

The man moved the pistol into Caine's side.

Caine faced the instrument panel, trying to keep from weaving. He moved his hands and felt the ship rising. He tried to keep the rise steady and gradual, but his hands jerked. The ship tipped and swung toward the side of the clearing. Thick vine-trees came out of the fog, and Caine forced the ship straight up, the jets roaring. The silver jetcopter swung back and forth, climbing, slipping, dropping. He couldn't move the controls properly.

The sound of the waterfall was in their ears then, and Caine jammed the ship to the opposite side. They touched the tops of the trees, and finally he brought it up enough to be over the jungle and the rocks.

Instinct gave Caine vague direction, and he kept his altitude exaggerated to insure against his faulty senses.

"Some say the Screece gem is a diamond," the woman said, dreamily. "Some say it's an emerald. Some say it's a ruby. What do you say it is, Charles?"

Fairchild sat motionless, silent, in the seat beside Caine. He still held the pistol so that the muzzle pointed into Caine's side.

"Don't try anything, Caine," he said. "I'll smash us all to hell before I'll give up."

Caine flew the ship.

"It's romantic, isn't it?" the woman said, from behind Caine. "The most valuable gem in the world, deep in the Venusian jungle, protected by the long, long cats, and my sweet Charles is going to get it for me. Bless you, Charles. You are an extraordinary husband. I hope the cats don't get you."

Caine heard the words, but his brain was too slow and thick with the drug to understand the sharpness of her words. He only moved the controls, feeling the gun Fairchild held against him. In this condition, he knew that if he tried to fool Fairchild, the man—his nerves tightened the way they were—would not hesitate to pump the pistol into Caine's body.

Caine worked his fingers numbly. If only he could find his control, his response. . .

They were approaching the area where Caine thought the temple should be. "Somewhere," he said, and his tongue was clumsy as he tried to speak. "Somewhere."

THE mist was like layers of soft tissue around the ship. The visibility was not much more than the length of the wings. He eased the ship down, slowly, foot by foot. A golden pike-shaped object appeared beside the right wing. Caine brought the ship up.

He grinned, a sly sudden grin. "Temple," he said foolishly. "Couldn't have hit it closer sober." He thought about the cleverness of what he had just said, laughing over it inside, noticing with a queer detachment how his words came out as though he had been drinking. The damned drug, he thought, but the laughter came up through him and it echoed through the cabin.

Caine felt the gun go hard against his side, the steel bruising his ribs. His laughter was cut short, as though a gag had been slammed across his mouth. "Can't help. . ." he began.

But Fairchild's face was close to his own. "I'll make you laugh, Caine," the man whispered furiously. "I'll make you laugh over what happened. You think about that, eh? You think about that, you bloody. . ."

Vaguely, Caine knew the pistol had been pulled away from his ribs and was whipping toward his arm. He tried to shift out of its way, but he caught it squarely. The pain paralyzed him and even the sound of his cry was caught by his teeth snapping together. The ship wavered and slid downward.

"You stupid fool!" the woman screamed at her husband.

Caine felt himself sliding out of his seat, the pain throbbing. He caught himself and reached for the controls with his good hand. But he only half-balanced the ship before he saw the tip of a vine-tree. He cut the jets. The trees were all around them, enveloping them. He listened to the snap of the wings, heard distantly the splinter of glass, then nothing.

He was looking at the shape of his arm, when he found his vision again. It was bent peculiarly.

Whose crazy damned arm is that? he thought.

Somehow his brain wanted him to laugh, to slap the comic twisted arm, lying in front of his eyes. The laughter was in his mouth and through his teeth and he raised his good hand.

"Oh, Lord," he said, suddenly sober and feeling the blinding pain. He caught his good hand around a broken metal shaft, and the pain drew tears to his eyes.

I think I'll just go to sleep and die right now, he thought, wondering vaguely where his will and his strength had gone. Did they bleed out? he thought. Did they fall out when the man struck him? Did the woman draw them out last night, like a vampire draws out blood?

Good night, he thought, dimly, dropping his hand from the shaft. Good-by. He closed his eyes.

He was screaming, he knew, and somewhere he heard a man's voice say, "The gauze. The gauze." It was a grating sound, like a metal wheel turning over gravel. He opened his eyes, and Fairchild was wrapping the gauze around his broken arm, splinted from a part of the cabin panelling.

Fairchild looked at him. There was a thick growth of gray whiskers, stubbling the man's chin and cheeks, Cain noticed, and the man's eyes were not sad any more. They appeared to burn, like his wife's. He grinned at Caine and it was a humorless grin, his teeth set tightly together. "You're lucky, Caine," he said. "I set it instead of cutting it off."

Caine watched the grinning stubbled face. He felt a shudder trembling through his body, and the sweat on his face turned cold. I'm not Nic Caine, he thought. Surely not. I'm just a frightened, chilled man with no guts or reason. I am a rubber puppet, that's who I am. Pull the strings, Mr. Puppet Master.

"Get up," said Fairchild.

"That's right," Caine mumbled, smiling crazily.

He pushed himself up and stood swaying in the cabin of the broken ship. He looked around, his eyes suddenly fierce. "Is this twisted wreck my pretty silver ship?" he asked loudly. "Oh, no!" he said, and tried to kick at a splintered panel.

He felt himself pitching forward, and he caught out his good hand, steadying himself. The drug, the pain, he thought deep in his brain, my damned arm.

But he was like two people, watching each other, shifting back and forth from one identity to another. Rational, irrational,

laughing, crying.

He looked at the woman. She was huddling near the rear of the cabin. Blood spilled in a thin line down the side of her face from a cut above her eyes. "We'll never get out," she said. Her voice was a high-pitched sound with no change of tone in it. "We'll never get out."

"Why don't you dance for us?" Caine said, blinking with the brightness of his suggestion.

"Move, Caine," the man said, prodding Caine's back. She'll dance when I give her the gem."

Caine crawled slowly out of the cabin. The undercarriage had been smashed, and the cabin was level with the ground. It was like going into a sea of vapor when he got out of the ship.

How long? he thought, looking at his splintered arm. How long would the drug hang onto his brain? This was not himself. This was a weak spinning scarecrow who was drunk on dope.

Then the pain smashed into his awareness. It disappeared as suddenly. He was in agony, then there was only the foolish whirling of his brain. He turned slowly, like a limp mannequin, searching the blankness of the mist.

"Where am I" he said aloud.

"About one mile from Heaven," said Fairchild behind him, holding now a rifle from Caine's cabin rack. "Janet?" the man said to the cabin. "Take one of those damn rifles. Mr. Caine is going to lead us to his happy end. The gem first," he said to Caine. "Then you. I'll let you touch it before you die."

The woman came out of the cabin, a rifle in her hands. She pointed it at Fairchild. "We'll never get out of here," she repeated, in her sing-song tone.

"Not without me," Fairchild said quietly, looking at the pointed rifle. He turned his back to her.

The woman's face had lost its pink radiance, and it was white except where the blood trickled.

"Let's go, Caine," Fairchild said.

"I don't know where to go," Caine said stupidly.

"Up," Fairchild said. "Just lead the way up. I don't need you to know where the tem-

ple is now. You got us much closer than we'd planned, you know. You're just bait now, Caine. Bait for the cats. Remember the cats?"

"I won't go through that," the woman said, staring at the mist around them.

"All right," Fairchild said. "Stay here and meet the cats alone. I'll bring the gem back to you, if there's anything left of you. But, by heck, you're going to get it, do you hear me?" He faced her again. "You're going to get that gem if I have to kill seventeen cats, and Caine, and even you. Dead or alive, you're going to get it, do you hear?"

The woman was pale, sick-looking, and Caine tried to remember how she had looked the night before. It was too much effort.

"Move," said the man, prodding Caine. "Move, Mr. Caine."

IV

Caine moved, trying to find some hate to use on himself for letting the sight of the rifle in the man's hands frighten him the way it did. But there was only a dull craziness within him, where the strength and nerve used to be. It was as though his steel had been melted and drained out of him by the drug.

I'm like a fish, he thought, pushing through the foliage, a fish with a broken fin. Do cats like fish with broken fins? he wondered. And the three of them were moving in a slow silent line through the Venusian wilds.

The sounds were in Caine's brain like a dozen records being played in a large echoing room. Teewh birds pointed their yellow beaks and came screaming at his head. The kiitz birds fluttered wildly out of the thickets, their frightened sound like the rake of giant fingernails across smooth slate.

But there were other things in this part of the jungle. Soft, gelatinous phules, the size of a man's hand, hung to the vine-trees, and when Caine passed them they shifted off the trees to his skin and began their search for juices out of his own body. He swept them away, one at a time, and more found him.

"I have nothing left in my veins for you," he said to one of them sticking to his waist. "Maybe warm tea?"

Fairchild touched the rifle against his back, and Caine pushed the phule away.

A snake-like trill wriggled in front of him, its purple and black skin glistening as though it had been drawn through oil. It was about four feet long and as thick as a heavy rope. Its never-closing eyes stared at Caine. "Hello, friend," Caine said, reaching out his good arm. The trill slid away.

That's what I really am like, he decided, wondering when the pain would come shattering into him again. I am like the trill. I ought to lie down on the ground and start wriggling, instead of walking.

The pain found him then, and his brain was cleared briefly of the veil of the drug. The pain lasted longer this time. Drug wearing off, he thought, only now I don't want it to. And then he thought of the cats; the terrible cats, the horrible cats. . . .

His brain spun and the veil dropped. What was I thinking about? he said to himself. Cats? Was it the cats? Why? Cats are pretty, especially grith cats. They are black, like the spots on a leopard. And what makes me think of a leopard? I'll ask the man behind me, he thought, and stopped.

"Go on, Caine," Fairchild whispered. "Go on, damn you."

Leopards? Leopards? Caine asked himself, and he pushed on through the growth, feeling the ground rising more steeply.

Razor plants licked at his skin, until his flesh was slit finely in a dozen places. The gauze around his arm became a fuzzy mass, like rags. If I see a cat, Caine promised himself, I'll take a splint off my arm and hit him over the head with it.

The mist hung around them like a hungry shroud, eager to cloak everything on the planet with its muggy wetness. Then the growth lessened a bit, and Caine saw bare rock here and there. It was easier to move and he did not jar his arm as much, but somewhere in his brain an old knowledge told him that this would be certain grith territory, and every step now was a step closer to the black face with the orange eyes and sharp teeth.

Caine felt himself growing weaker, and each motion was a building effort. The heat had risen, but there was no sweat on his face now, only a burning dryness. His head seemed to start its floating again, and he

thought for a moment that it might drift up over the trees, like a balloon.

The idea was very funny to him, and laughter grew inside of him. He grinned, feeling his stomach move with it, until suddenly he was freezing his movement, laughing into the mist-filled air, staring straight into the orange eyes of a grith cat.

The laughter stopped in his mouth. He blinked once. The cat didn't move. Fairchild and the woman, Caine knew, had halted behind him. The cat's eyes shown through the mist like fiery globes. I'll pet him, Caine thought with great detachment, right on his black head, and then he'll go away.

The cat was motionless.

Caine knelt slowly, looking straight into the cat's eyes. It was about ten yards away.

Caine turned to look at Fairchild. The man was on one knee, the rifle pointing at the cat's head. The woman waited behind him, half-crouched, holding her rifle tight against her side.

Caine looked back to the cat, moving his head slowly. He could see the great swishing tail, moving back and forth, back and forth.

Why doesn't the man shoot? Caine asked himself. Why is he waiting this way?

Time halted.

Caine edged his look back to Fairchild. You crazy fool, he thought. You have the rifle in your hands, you. . .

And then he saw the sweat dripping from the man's face, the staring eyes, drained of their focus by fear. The man's body was trembling, and Caine thought: he's going to drop the rifle out of his hands, he's. . .

THE woman screamed. "Kill him! Kill him—" The rifle exploded in her hands and bullets whined through the air. Caine felt a hot sting in his shoulder. And the cat was a roaring, crazed thing that swept through the air, a flash of shining blackness.

The air came apart with the sound of the rifle and the screams of the woman and the roaring of the cat. Caine waited, as though this were a dream he was watching. The cat had leaped straight for the woman, and she was tangled with the black and white claws now, so that Caine saw only a rolling, screaming mass.

Then there was no more sound from the

woman, just a broken, bleeding body, and the cat was crouching again, the black coat stippled with red, the orange eyes wild.

Caine blinked, realizing that Fairchild was sprawled beside him, a bullet through his head, his hands just touching his unfired rifle.

I can't do it, Caine thought, looking at the rifle. Too slow. I'll have those claws in me before I can even touch it.

The cat hugged closer to the ground, its muscles bunching.

I'll try, Caine thought, and his hand was moving toward the rifle, slowly, like a floating feather, it seemed. Jump, he said silently to the cat. I can't do it.

"Grith?" sounded a flute-like voice.

The cat was motionless.

"Grith?"

The cat rose slowly and backed, tail swishing. Greer hands slapped together, and the cat turned and disappeared.

Caine placed his palms flat against the ground, propping himself, and watched the approaching figures. The mist seemed to be disappearing, and he could see more clearly the green skin and the large, unblinking eyes that looked out solemnly from beneath the hoods of the gray capes.

Priests? Caine wondered. *From the temple?* I didn't know there were Venusians here, he said to himself, and although it was a very slight disclosure, as though he had suddenly learned that there were more men on Venus than women, he was astounded and impressed with it. "Well," he said, grinning up at them as they stopped beside him. "Well, well."

He got to his knees and, still smiling, looked at his arm where the gauze had come loose. He shook his head in wonderment. He narrowed his eyes and examined the blood trickling from the surface wound in his shoulder. "Well, well," he repeated, and stood up.

The woman was a mangled shape on the wet ground, and the man lay very still. Caine looked from one to the other. "Yes, yes," he said, aloud.

He turned to the gray-caped Venusians and found the somber eyes watching him, in their kindly way. One of them reached out and touched Caine's shoulder above the broken arm. Others moved to the bodies of

the man and woman and bent over them, making floating motions with their delicate green hands.

Praying? Caine wondered, watching these motions. He shrugged. He couldn't hold a thought very long.

The mist was evaporating quickly. Caine, looking up, thought he could see a pointed outline. Then suddenly—high above—there was the golden temple, a shimmer of towering spires of yellow beauty, splashed over by brilliant sunshine.

Caine turned his face up to a strange sun, a blinding sun that sent its bright life down through the leaves. And Caine was aware that the caped figures were kneeling all around, praying in a jumble of voices, their hands stretching up to the infrequent visitor of light.

What are they saying? Caine asked, smiling queerly. What is it they're saying? Screece? The Sun? The most valuable gem on Venus? Is that what they worship in the golden temple? Caine looked at the man and then at the woman. Is that what they had come from Earth and from Mars to find? The Sun? He felt the laughter starting in him again, as though it were someone else laughing. But his mouth widened and his teeth glistened in the sunlight, and he laughed long pealing laughter.

"Here it is," he said, staggering to the side of the man's body. "Here's your gem. Do you see it, Fairchild?" He pointed to the sky. "Give it to her," he said, laughing through his words. "No? I'll give it to her for you then. How's that?" He turned and moved slowly to the woman, stumbling. "Here," he said to the woman's staring eyes. "Here it is, you see?"

He looked at her face, shadowed by a large leaf of a vine-tree. He reached up and jerked the leaf away so that the sunlight fell full on her white face. "There! Take it! From Charles, to you, through me. Isn't it beautiful, so big, so brilliant, so . . ." The laughter was getting in the way of his words and he could feel tears going down his face.

Pale green hands were holding him so that he wouldn't fall. And they were moving him away toward the temple. Caine looked at the large kindly eyes around him, feeling the hands guiding him. He couldn't stop laughing, only he wished to God he could, because it made the pain worse. And he couldn't take much more pain.

The lips of one of the green faces moved. "Wress?" said the voice, the word pronounced with difficulty.

"Rest?" Caine said, between spasms of laughter that he was quite certain now was crying, instead. "Yes, yes," he said, trying to wipe at his tears. "Oh, yes. Rest . . ."

Pale green hands extend again, palms down, and make sweeping downward motions, destroying evil. They are cupped then and raised, slowly, as though lifting purity to the top of the golden spires and beyond, where a bright sun burns. Feet step soundlessly and figures kneel, circling about a fist-sized orb. "Screece," says a flute-like voice. "Screece," says another. "Screece," say a dozen voices. Hands motion and the silver globe is no longer dull and cloudy, but filled with pure shining sunlight, so that it glitters like a thousand diamonds. Lips move silently. A cat whimpers somewhere, then sleeps. Silence.

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Bogus Angel watched protectively from the wall top as the mechanical bloodhound inched toward Teucete while she talked with the police.

GAMA IS THEE!

By STANLEY MULLEN

On Venus, if one rings a doorbell, or bangs on a locked gate at night, it is adventure. You never know who—or what—will answer your summons. The door swings slowly open and you brace yourself to look. Will it be maid—or monster—or both?

WHEREVER men gather and talk, someone is sure to mention Khaljean's, on Venus. Men will always be fascinated by tales of the strange and wonderful and fantastic, and Khaljean's—zoo, petshop, wild animal supply house—

is the stuff from which legends are made. One hears of the place on Mars or Earth, on Titan or Rhea, on Callisto or Ganymede, even in the subsurface mines of Pluto or the curious twilight outposts on Mercury, and some of the yarns will probably lessen



the tedium of light-year watches when the first manned spacer pushes beyond the frontiers of the solar system.

Most of the stories are 21st century versions of the tall tale, for both establishment and owner stagger imagination and breed fabulous accounts. A rumor that Khaljean will fabricate to order any nightmarish monster from synthetic flesh and organic spare parts is obvious exaggeration. The claim that Khaljean can mate any curious life-form captured by far-roving hunters is also false—since he failed twice. Khaljean loves animals and collects them chiefly for pleasure. He will sell some for pets and for educational exhibitions, but for each one sold he keeps ten. Everyone knows that he has frequently risked death rather than kill or injure a living creature.

Of all his zoo's wonders, none can compare with Khaljean—for man is the most fantastic of animals, and Khaljean is the most extraordinary of men. Khaljean is both public figure and man of mystery. Nobody knows his race or origin, and nowadays nobody asks. With the epidemics of mutation in the Earth-colonies of Venus, and the standard gene-tangents accepted among Venusian natives, such curiosity is bad form. And dangerous.

So Khaljean's, and the stories about it, have grown steadily through the years. The strangest story of all concerning the zoo is one that, for good reason, no one tells. It happens to be true. One night, in Castarona, by the Yellow Sea—

But the trouble did not start in Khaljean's. There are some who say it did not finish there . . .

AUSTERITY had finally caught up with Venus. Pao Chung's subcellar fungweed hell in the native quarter of old Castarona was ordered to close every night at midnight (Venus time)—or else. Being a Venusian business man, a very rugged individualist, and a type Q mutant, Pao Chung preferred to chance the "or else."

Among interesting people netted in the raid were:

Pao Chung, himself. Bland and overcivilized, he had grown rich from traffic in illegal drugs and the outlawed mechanical hypnotizers. Despite pointed ears and a

gnome-like expression of detached malice, he appeared to be reasonably human, even in his devotion to vice as a means of livelihood. Anything illegal and profitable was his vocation; his hobbies ranged from innocent blackmail to murder for fun. Recent extension of his operations from slave trading into political corruption had incensed even the grafting officials of Castarona. They waited only an opportunity to catch him off balance. Hence the raid.

Bat Ferris, spaceman, wanted on an open charge warrant sworn out by Solar Surveys, Inc.,—and wanted preferably alive and in condition to answer questions. Ferris had learned long ago not to give his right name, but an alias is poor disguise if one's brain wave patterns happen to be on file. And sometimes if they are not. Being off "reservation" at all, and particularly without permission and lacking his ident-armband, would mean real trouble. His capture in the raid was pure mischance, due to entering Pao Chung's only for the virtuous purpose of rescuing his partner and friend—

Bogus Angel, X-type mutant from South Venus, painfully well known to police records. The only angelic attribute he could claim was his twenty-foot wingspread. His face bore eerie resemblance to those demonic gargoyles carved on medieval cathedrals. Fine fur in stripes of ochre, burnt orange and smudged brown covered the visible parts of his anthropoid anatomy, making him resemble a tiger left in the rain long enough for the dyes to run.

Angel liked peace and quiet, and resorted to gambling, theft, arson, aggravated assault and occasional assassination to obtain it. In the icy morass of his soul, the few cracks vented sinister and malicious humor. His greatest virtue was warped and violent loyalty to Ferris—which was not necessarily a virtue from the official point of view. Angel's appetite for and capacity for misuse of drugs, alcohol and mechanical hypnotizers was miraculous—but when loaded, he was dangerous.

Of nine others scooped in the raid, only one fact need be mentioned. They are still in jail, which indicates lack of initiative or good sense. Jailbreak on Venus is a sporting proposition, and inevitably weeds the sheep from the goats. Pao Chung and Bogus Angel

were definitely goats, and Ferris may be considered a dark gray sheep. For various reasons, it was essential to all three to escape—and quickly.

They stood together in the jailyard. Ferris and Angel had relapsed into silence as Pao Chung approached.

"When are you planning escape?" Pao Chung asked with a directness not expected of him.

Angel chuckled, but Ferris stared suspiciously. "How are you so sure we intend to escape?" he parried.

Pao Chung shrugged. "A simple question easily answered. While your friend was in my shop I manipulated the hypnotic machines. He talked, chiefly about himself, but also about you. Enough to give me a clue to your real identity, though probably he does not guess it himself. I know that you dare not stay. Eventually, they will check your brain wave patterns and learn . . . too much. Which is the greater risk?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"None, directly," Pao Chung admitted. "But I enjoy fishing in troubled waters. Other people's business can often be turned to my profit. In this case, since we are being frank, I wish to leave with you when you go. Take me along, or I talk before you can make the attempt."

Mayhem shone in Angel's eyes but Ferris put a restraining hand on the furry arm.

"DEAD men don't talk," urged Angel hopefully, his non-human tongue licking feral lips.

"Wait," ordered Ferris. "If you kill him now, we will have no chance to escape. It would draw too much attention to us."

"Besides being foolish," said Pao Chung smoothly. "Both of you are strangers in Castarona. Where would you go? Who would hide you? How long would you last?"

"Talk fast," Ferris advised gently. "If you know so much, you know we have little to lose."

"Only your lives, perhaps. More, if my deductions are correct. Listen to me. Like you, I am in greater peril here. My offense is a minor one. By now, I should have been fined and let go with a warning. I suspect the authorities of more sinister intentions. It will be easy to find a pretext if they wish

to be rid of me. I must escape. Alone, none of us would stand a chance. Together, who knows . . . ?"

Ferris consulted his partner with a glance. Angel nodded, but imposed a question.

"And afterwards, what of your deductions?"

"I will forget them," promised Pao Chung.

"See that you do," said Ferris. "Or we will."

Pao Chung ignored the prophecy amiably. "I know a possible refuge once we have managed the escape. A man in the city owes me favors. As refuge, of course, it will be temporary. They will have mechanical trackers after us eventually, but not at first. Electronic bloodhounds would spoil their sport, make killing us too easy. But the nature of our sanctuary will give them pause for a time. Complex, interesting and dangerous, it is the one place in Castarona no one will think to look. And there is enough space to hide in for quite a while."

"Such a place sounds interesting," Ferris agreed. "But I suppose you know every unsavory rat's nest in Castarona."

"Not a rat's nest," said Pao Chung, smiling. "Much better. Have you heard of Khaljean's?"

"Who hasn't? That should muddle the pursuit for a day or two. But can you count on Khaljean?"

Pao Chung snorted. "Blackmail is my professional secret, so don't ask details. Khaljean will grant us refuge. Not willingly, perhaps, but I have enough on him to guarantee his conduct. How about a plan for getting out of jail?"

Ferris laughed harshly. "You've paid your passage. Now we'll pay ours. Hiding out with the rest of the wild animals seems very appropriate. Listen carefully . . ."

Pao Chung and Angel bent an ear, nodding approval.

Jailbreak looks temptingly easy. Hazards of escape are mostly mental, so far as barriers of barred doors and windows, locked gates, or walls of stone, metal or plastic are concerned. Inner and outer doors are frequently open. Prisoners move about at will, within defined limits. Even there, no physical hindrance is put in the escapee's way. He may pause at the door and indulge in whim-

sical repartee with guards or warden. He may delay his exit long enough to exchange fond farewells with friends and fellow inmates—and he had better.

Once outside the fun begins. It is open season on fugitive prisoners, and the first guard lucky enough to fatally blast an escapee receives two weeks with pay and a cash bonus for every hour short of the deadline required for killing or recapturing a runaway. Any prisoner who makes good his escape, and lasts a full three days is written off the books. Either way, he is written off, since the guards make no pretense of trying to recapture him alive, and the hunt is geared to surprising efficiency.

It should be a spirited gamble, but few men ever make the attempt, and fewer still succeed—so the sport may be said to languish. History records only five men who made the finish line, though hundreds used to try for it. Building walls opposite the gateway bear leprous scars from blaster discharges which brought several daring attempts to pyrotechnical conclusions.

Angel sauntered up to a guard on duty at the main gate. He looked across the busy street at the flaking walls and evidences of extreme heat. A bored guard glanced casually at the brawny Venusian, taking curious note of his folded wings.

"Going out?" asked the guard with cynical humor. "You'll get those wings singed, sonny."

Angel smiled, and a dream of violence lived briefly in his gem-faceted eyes. "I might," he mused softly. "What handicap will you give me?"

"Close my eyes and count to five," offered the guard, grinning viciously.

"Start counting," suggested Angel.

THE guard's eyes and mouth opened wide, his grin changed to a glare, alert and suspicious. At that moment, alarms blared in the cellblock and jailyard.

Angel appeared to stumble, thrusting himself heavily against the guard. Already off-balance, trying to look in two directions at once, the man lurched halfway through the gate. Automatic selenium cell alarms caught the movement and added their wild clamors to the jangling babel from the building. Volumes of dense black smoke poured from

doors and windows of the cellblock's lower floors. From above came shrill screams from the trapped inmates on upper floors.

"Fire!" yelled Angel. Then he was running, not through the gate but towards the building.

Guards and prisoners milled in ultimate confusions. Jailyard was a melee, but Angel forced a passage. At the cellblock doorway he paused long enough to make sure that guards were rushing a long ladder of lightweight metal alloy to the wall.

Inside, he plunged through churning confusions of smoke, sound and invisible solids. In a city as imflammably built as Castarona, fire inevitably creates panic. Equipment must be always at hand. Automatic sprinklers were already deluging the threatened interior with water and chemicals. Angel waded knee-deep in chemical foam to the stairway and ascended against the pressure of a descending waterfall. Voices and metallic alarms mingled in shrill discords.

Groping blindly and colliding with hysterical prisoners, Angel fought up the spiraling cascades of the stairway like a trout seeking the spawning grounds.

At the fourth floor, he got to a window and smashed the glass, then set up a bedlam of howls and shrieks. From below, the light-alloy ladder angled up toward him. Its hooks engaged the window ledge. With a yelp of maniacal joy, he snatched it from the hands of the steadiers on the ground, and gave a series of quick jerks to dislodge the mounting guards and firefighters. With easy strength, he lifted it clear of the ground and rung by rung hoisted it upward. Bat Ferris and Pao Chung grasped it from the roof parapet and held on while he raced upstairs again and helped them drag it to the roof.

The nearest building was just about a ladder-length away.

By prodigies, they raised it to the vertical, then let it slant in the direction indicated. It toppled and swung in a wild arc. There was a bad moment when all three realized that it did not quite reach. Acting instantaneously, Angel lifted the pivot end, hooked his knees to the parapet and extended the ladder by his own length. The far end struck hard, bounced high, nearly tearing Angel from his precarious hold.

"Over!" he commanded, while the vibrations still jarred painfully through his body.

Without argument, one at a time, Ferris and Pao Chung walked gingerly across the perilous, swaying bridge. Kneeling, Ferris made sure the ladder hooks were secure on the other parapet. He cried out.

Angel relaxed his kneeholds, beating his wings furiously and climbing like a bird on a breaking treelimb. The ladder swung in giant's pendulum. Angel moved with lightning speed and miraculous precision, maintaining balance with threshing pinions while his lithe legs and powerful arms carried him upward. He was mounting the upper rungs when the ladder crashed savagely against the building side, writhing, vibrating, tearing its hooks free and sending broken masonry crashing into the dizzy depths below. Angel leaped clear, caught the parapet and dragged himself up.

Guards boiled onto the jailhouse roof and laced blaster beams across the chasm between buildings. Crouched low, the fugitives ran, taking advantage of every cover. Explosions followed them and they raced through pelting storms of molten stone and metal.

"Over the roofs," Ferris shouted. "They'll follow soon enough. Probably the near streets are already blocked off, and we'll need all the time we can snatch."

They halted for breath in the shelter of a vast dome. Pao Chung glanced admiringly at his enforced allies. "Well-generated," he commented. "Even to the timing of the faked fires. Too bad such talent as ours must be wasted on an audience as unappreciative as the police. However, you've kept your bargain. We're out, and still alive. With a few minutes' start, and the rooftops of the city to play hide and seek in. Now, if we can reach Khaljean's Petshop."

"We'll reach it," Ferris promised grimly.

II

AROUND them was the fantastic skyline. From below, in the teeming streets, came a rising buzz like the droning activity of a hive of angry bees. Above, rose the city-wide dome of fused quartz, its crystalline concavity faintly iridescent as it reflected the questioning beams of giant searchlights.

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North, between the fugitives and the older native quarters of Castarona, were the gigantic systems of airlocks, and below that, the sprawling tangles of dockland.

Ferris led his companions in a tortuous route that covered miles of angled and uneven rooftops. Realizing that his ident-cards must have come through, he knew that police and security officials must be turning the city inside out in a wild scramble to locate and deal with him. Speed was essential, and more than his personal safety depended upon the outcome of the wild chase over the jagged skylines.

Knots of wary policemen and determined security soldiers invaded the rooftops and began searching the hundreds of square miles. In case the escaped prisoners had descended from the high levels, even business blocks were being turned out. The whole city was undergoing systematic scouring. Officialdom was desperate and badly frightened. Mechanical trackers had already been sent for. Never before had they been used so early in the game. The man, or whatever he was, Bat Ferris must be found at once, slain if possible. The hunt was on, full cry.

After two near brushes with patrols, Ferris finally decided that it would be safer to descend to the streets. Dragnets spread over the world above the city, and only luck had kept the trio from being sighted a dozen times. They were near the edge of the city where the half-bubble of the dome comes down into a series of cones which are the great airlocks protecting the city-atmosphere from the troubled violence and noxious fumes of outer Venus.

Like shadows the fugitives descended, going down darkened spirals of stairways, stealing elevators, moving furtively among dark, twisting alleyways, crawling under vast landing stages and skirting heaps of exotic Venusian produce ready for shipping to the nine inhabited worlds. In the cluttered dockland areas they collided blindly with an armed patrol.

Angel, acting on pure instinct, leaped high, then swooped down like a striking hawk. The rustle of his opened wings was like the flapping of wind-whipped flames. His outstretched arms gathered two of the four man patrol and crushed life from them before they sensed danger. Ferris was al-

most as quick. He leaped and strangled, and a man died in swift, deadly silence. Pao Chung, unused to managing his own violence, was clumsy. A blaster went off. Then Angel took over the difficulty. The soldier broke and ran, screaming, firing his blaster twice more without aiming.

The uproar would bring help. But the soldier was beyond help. Angel soared and dived. There was no fight.

Now armed, the fugitives fled swiftly. Pao Chung took over the lead. By devious streets and crooked alleys, they went in the extremes of haste.

Further caution was useless. Now that the alarm had been given, speed was the only hope. Pao Chung knew every secret rat-run in the old native quarter. He used most of them. If the passage of the fugitives caused a ripple of excitement among the polyglot denizens of that forbidding area, they did not know it, nor heed it. All three knew the natives well enough to be certain that the police could expect no favors from that source. All Venusians are natural anarchists, born outlaws and rebels against authority. The trail would die on stubborn tongues unless mechanical trackers were used.

Even then, unless the police and security squads came in massed force, there would be incidents to delay pursuit. Natives, and the human debris of nine worlds which had found refuge in the quarter, had no reason to love authority. In one sense, the area was an armed camp within the walls. Uneasy truce at best existed between these motley dwellers and the intruding minions of the nominal officialdom. While the hunted could expect no actual help from the guerilla forces of Castarona's underworld, there was the certainty of hindrance to the hunters.

Patrols and searching squads converged on the freight-dock stages, drawn by radioed reports of a clash. From there a trail of sorts led straight into the native quarter. As the soldiers and police massed on the fringes of the area, sparks of trouble began to develop, were quickly fanned to flame, and quenched only by continuous violence and the arrival of overwhelming forces.

Pao Chung led his companions into a dark, zigzagging alley.

"Not far now," he gasped hoarsely, struggling for breath.

From close behind came a rising uproar.

THE alley ended abruptly against a high, blank, curving wall of reinforced concrete. Pao Chung's raw, burning throat refused speech, but he gestured over the wall. There was no gate. Angel sprang lightly to the top and gave his partners in crime a hand up. They dropped into darkness on the far side. Light writhed and flickered curiously on the great dome overhead. Tumult died away behind them as they fled across a wide open space, then rose to shocking crescendoes. Reflections flared in the dome.

Uproar dwindled to uneasy silence, as if the massed forces of law and order had found the native quarter stickier going than expected, and had been forced to retire in disorder.

Pao Chung stopped as if checking directions, then led off at a sharp tangent. The way went through fields. Diffused light from the tall city-buildings filtered in here and gave some sense of the ground surface, which was fortunate. Numerous small fences of wire hummed and sputtered on insulator-posts. Electrified guard-fences. Pao Chung hurdled them carefully, but they were low enough to trip and incinerate an incautious trespasser, unaware of their existence and unused to their spacing.

Oppressive silence brooded over the place. Atmosphere was thick with pungent and exotic odors that lingered with unpleasantly alien tang in the nostrils.

Ahead loomed a high stockade of chrome-steel pilings, pierced by a single monstrous gate.

Pao Chung ran up and hammered on the gate. Its reverberations roused thunderous echoes in the night. A curious echo persisted and increased in volume.

On Venus, if one climbs a fence, rings a doorbell, or bangs on a locked gate at night, it is adventure. You never know who or what will answer your summons. The door, swings slowly open, and you brace yourself to look. Will it be maid or monster—or both?

This was Khaljean's . . .

The gate swung open a scant double handspan, checked by a short length of

sturdy chain. A head poked through the aperture. An interesting head, even in the difficult light. Details were obscure, but there was a flash of curd-white skin, fine-modeling of feature, a delicate oval face framed in a swinging bell of dark hair.

In this case, the summons was answered by, presumably, a maid. Kahljean's daughter, Teucrete, herself something of a legend.

A woman can be described in terms of anatomical rhapsody. Or one may dwell endlessly upon sweetness of disposition, upon quaint and unique charms of personality. A potential lover may fashion poetic conceits upon the lilting moonbeam qualities in her voice, compare her skin to flower-petals, her eyes to gemfires, liken the graceful movements of limbs and body to the liquid symphonies of swirling water. Or these matters may be left wholly to the imagination and the girl described obliquely by reference to her effect upon the male population in her immediate vicinity.

The effect was jarring enough.

"Go away!" she said inhospitably. She leaned further through the opening to snarl fluent imprecations in Venusian billingsgate at the nocturnal callers.

Pao Chung braved the storm. "Shut up!" he said evenly.

Teucrete's eyes fixed on him savagely, and she took a sharp breath with the obvious intention of renewing her tirade. Then she thought better of it and restrained her outrage long enough to throw a taunt in his face.

"Is Pao Chung so desperate for money that he comes now in the middle of the night? You're two days early for your payment. Come back then."

"Call your father," ordered the Venusian.

"Kahljean is not here. He's . . . hunting. Come back after noon tomorrow if you must see him."

The head withdrew inside. The gate crashed shut. Bolts grated.

"Shall I fly over the stockade and throttle her?" asked Angel, rippling his wings.

Pao Chung hammered the gate again. As before, the racking animal chorus repeated the sound, with variations. Pao Chung kept pounding until the gate was opened again.

This time the head did not appear, but a wiry female voice addressed them from the inside darkness.

"Still here? The police must be hunting you."

"They are."

"Good! I will point you out and stay to watch the kill."

Pao Chung chuckled evilly. "Do that. The records of Kahljean's background and illegal activities is in my safe. My will provides for publication of all such papers upon my death."

The voice hesitated. "It might be worth humiliation or disgrace to be rid of you permanently."

"It might," agreed Pao Chung. "Many people have thought so. I wonder if Kahljean will be one of them."

With a scrape of bare metal, bolts retreated into sockets and the chain was removed. Crack widened enough to permit entrance.

"Come in, then," Teucrete said wearily. "I will let my father decide when he returns. For tonight, you can stay. But I won't answer for your safety. The animals are roused and nervous. I am not sure I can control them with strangers here."

BEASTLY cacophonies greeted the entrance of the fugitives. An atmosphere of alien and indescribable uneasiness pervaded the vast compound with its rows and piled banks of cages. The atmosphere was the emotion of night-hauntings, and the sound was its voice.

No sign above the gate proclaimed, *Here Dwells Nightmare*, nor, *Through These Portals Pass the Most Incredible Life-Forms in the Known Universe*. There was no circus atmosphere. Just a nameless blending of sounds and smells and alien vibrations that stirred the imagination like evil flames licking at forgotten folk memories. On Venus, the term *unearthly* has naturally lost meaning, but here was a hint of dreadful abysses beyond even the exotic fecundity of the cloud-veiled planet. Here were half-audible chords beyond all the known octaves. Here, in the troubled darkness, one sensed symbols of instincts, minds and feelings that man was never meant to know or understand. Here was the final question mark of evolu-

tion—whence, and to what dreadful purpose?

What incredible virtuosity of the Unknown Creator had brought these unthinkable beings into multiform existence? And why? What purpose did they serve in the plan of Creation? Or was there any purpose? Was there even a plan?

Bat Ferris remembered such thoughts from his lonely, monastic youth on Mars, and during the schooling period on Earth. One had time for long unhappy thoughts in such a segregated childhood and some of them still reverberated deep inside him.

The girl drew back to let them enter, flashing the beam of a hand radilume on each in turn. Her glance flicked each of them in examination sharp enough to draw blood. She received them in silence, for Teucrete's mind was not on the duties of a hostess to unexpected guests.

"Wait here," she ordered crisply. Then she went among the tangled avenues between cages and spoke soothingly to the caged brutes. Her voice crackled, purred, coughed, roared, hissed.

The bird people were the first to heed. Their bright, nervous chittering subsided into occasional geysers of chirping. Surly sand leopards from Mars paced their cages and vented sounds like needles caught in the grooves of antique disc recordings. Partially gaseous life forms from Saturn had no vocal apparatus, but showed their uneasy displeasures by flaring into sullen crimson and bruised purples of luminosity.

Ferris followed the girl closely on her rounds, his eyes staring in wonder at the caged monsters revealed when her light bathed the barred cubicles. Some cages were not cages in the ordinary sense at all. Behind barriers of streaming light crouched protoplasmic entities of no set form. Moondogs sported aimlessly in pools of ionized gas. Wireflies battered themselves against invisible net barriers. Complex mysteries of Plutonian life-forms floated in magnetic fields. Metallic crystals built themselves into coral-like colonies resembling miniature castles.

Less *outré* creatures inhabited the myriads of cell-blocks—the ordinary and extraordinary varieties of apes and cats and dogs, the bovines and marsupials, the squeaking

rats and trumpeting elephants, the endless species of sea-creatures, the tree-haunters and the desert dwellers, the burrowers and the flyers. There were supposedly extinct saurians, and examples of tomorrow's freaks and mutants. There were brute clowns and tragedians. There were—

But Khaljean's has been described often enough in magazine articles, sometimes with tri-dimensional pictures in color. Any reader so inclined may look into the back files of *Inter-Planetary Magazine* and stupefy himself with the famous issue of July, 2091.

Teucrete sensed that she was followed, but with pointed insolence, ignored Ferris and continued her rounds. Gradually, her eerie tones brought calm to the multiform excitements of the compound. She returned eventually to Pao Chung and Angel.

"I will take you back through the laboratories to the inner maze," she said irritably. "Move quietly and do not stumble in the dark. Some of the protection barriers are fragile, and a few exist only in the minds of the creatures in them. If excited too much, they can break through. Many are man-killers."

"One man-killer runs loose in here," observed Angel drily.

Teucrete disposed of the intended compliment with a sneer. "Pao Chung has long had such ideas. Through pressure on my father he has tried to . . . to buy or barter for me. Such disposal is mine to make, not my father's. I have my price, but it is high."

It is evidence of Teucrete's more obvious charms that three masculine minds went into gear, calculating resources.

Teucrete laughed viciously. "The first item is Pao Chung's head on a platinum platter."

"A platinum platter is not unobtainable," said Angel speculatively.

Pao Chung was not offended. He chuckled unpleasantly. "Such fire as yours would bring a high price in the slave marts of Yabn," he said. "My head would bring more, locally. Should we not move further from the gates? A scanner could pierce several layers of metal as thin as this stockade. Perhaps I can bring your price down, or my offer up. But another occasion for bargaining would suit both of us better."

"If there are other occasions for any of us," Ferris put in bitterly.

From outside came the sounds of many movements, the rustle and clatter of questing men, hoarse shouts and a confusion of crowd sounds. Above all, like a thin thread of sound, binding the other noises together, was a high, ear-piercing, nerve-wracking drone.

Angel flittered to the top of the stockade and peered warily through the razor-edged metal pilings. He swooped down to his companions with whispered verification of their suspicions.

"The mechanical trackers," he said.

"Perhaps there is still a deal open," muttered Pao Chung. He bowed with sardonic malice toward Teucrete. "We have one possession of greater value than my head or your body. My young friend here—"

Teucrete snorted contemptuously. "Him!" But her glance lingered on Ferris momentarily. "What do you mean?"

"Ferris is a gamma-man," said Pao Chung. Even Angel gasped with shock. Teucrete's eyes widened in incredulity, horror and fear.

III

FEAR is a subtle poison.

It began long ago, in a small New Mexico town, long before there were gamma-men or even interplanetary travel. The fear radiated from mushrooming clouds with impossible radiance at the core, and the fear did more harm to the minds of men than the deadly spectra of invisible death did to their bodies.

It began with scientists in cages in the name of national securities; it developed into continual surveillance for all men engaged in atomics. These workers, and their families, led cloistered, monastic lives. They intermarried, since there was little contact with outsiders, and they shared generations of haunted, spy-ridden lives. They lived in the midst of fear and mistrust, while the earth went through its chronic spirals of war and the preparations. Throughout history, scholars and philosophers have warned that knowledge must be free and universal, like sunlight. But there have always been wars and secrets and guarded weapons, and fear

is older than man.

Scientists were men of dangerous knowledge, of destructive potentials. As such, they were hostages of fear and illusions of safety. They were segregated, guarded, well-fed, and at first provided with all the deadly toys necessary to their amusements. It was all painfully logical and futile, but all the best brains of mankind were locked up to putrefy for lack of fresh air and the stimuli of mutual thoughts. Their knowledges and prerogatives became hereditary.

Natural law works against segregation. Artificial isolation of any group leads to misunderstandings, prejudices, resentments, mutual fears, and eventually to violence. Fear-hysteria is a serpent devouring its own tail. In time, the once-honored and glorified gamma-men became feared and hated. In the minds of the ignorant and superstitious populace, they were associated with medieval wizards and workers of dreadful miracles. The threat of gamma groups became a political pawn, and was used as a club to beat down restless, unhappy populations.

With their knowledge, and the popular delusion of their almost supernatural powers, it was easy enough for ambitious men to misuse the Scientists. In some cases, the gamma-men themselves usurped authority, but this noble experiment slipped through their fingers, and they lost control from sheer unworldliness. In truth, from the working of natural law, the juice had run out of them and they no longer understood the basics of normal human relations. In a final paroxysm of public panic, they were disarmed, their toys taken away, and every last gamma-man imprisoned in carefully guarded and isolated colonies. Like the ancient Indians, they were placed in reservations and kept there by force.

After this culminating outrage, the gamma-men lost heart for practical activity. Locked into their libraries, they turned to abstractions and dabbled in dead-end philosophies. Most of them were querulous oldsters, hidebound by tradition, their sciences now become a ritual religion, their books exalted as "The Word," and their fading knowledge still held secret for reasons long forgotten.

Not quite all gamma-men accepted this half-life allotted to them. There were sports,

avatars, occasional throwbacks who rebelled and went "off reservation."

None of these actually ran amuck, but so great was the fear-conditioning on one side, and so difficult the adaptation to ordinary living on the other that there were painful accidents and incidents. Nothing genuinely monstrous occurred, but enough friction developed to keep alive and add to the public dread of gamma-men. The term became a byword for nursery terror. And in their turn, the infant generations of gamma-men learned to pity and despise the ignorant and corrupt multitudes of normal humanity. They lost contact with their human heritage.

In recent years, few gamma-men had broken out to mingle with the expanding races now peopling and colonizing the frontiers of the solar system. Those few were hunted down like outlaws, and killed with brutal ingenuity.

But a new generation had come among gamma-men, with an urge so passionate and devout they themselves did not understand it. Either some latent folk-memory, or some emotional mutation, urged them to go forth and civilize mankind. In the old books, they tracked down knowledge and made grandiose plans for engineering the renaissance. Realizing their common origin, and longing for more nearly normal lives, they grouped together and made a pact to see some changes made.

Studying history and the other technologies of man, they soon discovered that social, economic and psychological sciences had lagged far behind the other developments. These were the blind spots of mankind, and these led to all the other serious and tragic misdirections of effort. Always, the sons of Adam had struggled to achieve workable systems, and always these systems had broken down or failed at critical moments.

If some means could be found—

Eventually, the means was tracked down from a clue in one of the oldest books. It was not found, but its existence deduced and proved to the satisfaction of the searchers. Somewhere, hidden in a forgotten corner of the solar system, was the missing tool.

This fact settled, it became necessary to locate and use the missing tool.

It was a pitifully small generation. Only seven bright-eyed and high-hearted young

men. But that night they broke out of their prescribed boundaries. They went off reservation, and separated in seven directions. Each had a theory, and a hope to be explored.

Without their ident-armbands of platinum with the old Greek letter deeply incised, they resembled any other seven youths picked at random from the teeming multitudes. They could mingle unquestioned, and their studies had prepared them for various tasks to which their forged papers entitled them. But adaptation was not easy.

A single incautious moment could betray them. Even a routine brain-wave check would be sufficient to identify the fugitives, for in subtle ways, the gamma-men were different.

Seven young men with a noble purpose, and fanatical hopes in their hearts.

And now there were two. Five of them had made fatal slips, and had been hunted down to hideous deaths.

Ferris was one of the two survivors.

FOUR people stood paralyzed while the hammering resounded at the gate. This was no human fist demanding attention, but an odd, robot-like clanking, as if a mechanical beast nosed in determined rooting against the metal leaves of the gate.

It was just such a beast. A burring whine rose into notes of shrill frustration. Metallic and electronic frustration, for the tracker was a bloodhound of vacuum tubes and relays and switches and batteries and transformers. Unerring and inexorable, its robot senses sorted a single frequency from all other brain wave patterns, and it clung to the trail with chilling efficiency. Something about its unhuman lusting numbed most quarry before the pursuers in charge of the monster could check its demonic eagerness for prey.

Now, like a metallic carnivore scenting blood, the robot tracker nuzzled the gate and rebounded to nuzzle gain.

All four of the humans inside the compound imagined the scene outside. Pencil beams of hand radilumes glinted here and there, the questing soldiers and police squads, the glittering serpentine body of the tracker, with its scurrying treads churning

clouds of dust as it whined and rooted at the gate.

Bat Ferris shot a glance of uneasy calculation at his three companions. The girl was an unknown quantity. Angel, momentarily shocked, was predictable enough within limits. Pao Chung was openly an opportunist, willing to turn any situation to personal profit. Unarmed, Ferris could not even deal with them, let alone with the police outside. He frowned angrily.

Teucrete's stare held on him for a moment, as if puzzled. Her eyes moved on, focusing on Angel, then Pao Chung. Presently, they came back to Ferris, amused and faintly mocking.

"What is a gamma-man doing here?" she asked.

"An interesting question," said Pao Chung ironically. "But not of prime importance at the moment."

Ferris watched a smile writhe on the girl's lips and felt a quick relief. She might help, if only to thwart Pao Chung's idea of throwing him to the human wolves outside.

A harsh voice clamored for admittance.

The animals were growing restive again. An earthy bellow boomed out against a counterpoint of birdlike trills. The sand leopards coughed guttural warnings. Somewhere a pygmy elephant trumpeted, and the giant insects burst into deafening clatters.

Teucrete motioned for silence, then drew the bolts and held the gate ajar on its short chain.

"Who's there?" she demanded roughly.

"Police," several voices explained. "Open the gate, or we'll break it down."

"Have you a warrant?"

"It's a security matter," someone explained hopefully.

"Tell that to the animals," she stormed.

"It's as much as your life's worth to come in here tonight. They're upset already, and I can't control them if you keep up this noise. Go away."

An authoritative voice blustered. "This is an important matter. Let me talk to your father."

Teucrete shrugged. "He will be back by noon tomorrow. Come then, and bring a warrant to search. Or—"

She followed the speech with some in-

sulting suggestions, not in the best of taste. The authoritative voice turned into a gargle addressing a slammed gate. Profanity did not disturb the tracker, which continued to root noisily at the metal.

Teucrete shoved bolts into sockets and stood back. She sighed, and beckoned the three men to follow her.

They moved amid a nightmarish cacophony of sounds. In memory roused by the various elements of the uproar, Bat Ferris revisited the far planets. Fortunately the light was too dim to see all the sources of sound, but Ferris mentally identified many of the caged dwellers by ear or by nose.

Wrigglers from the mercury mines of Callisto. Venusian swamp slugs, and grullcats from the Tihar Forest. Morbau-spawn from the honeycombed caverns of Triton. Wireflies and needle-flies, known by their eerie humming and buzzing. Seven-limbed bat-noses from the twilight zone of Mercury. Iceworms from Neptune and Pluto, and the deadly windharps from Mars. Amiably imbecilic moondogs from the satellites of Saturn pressed blank flat faces against the walls of their insulated glass tanks. Monsters out of nightmare. A madman's miscellany.

There was more, an incredible infinity of animal horizons. But imagination reels back, and description falters. What words can catalog the fringes of morphology!

FERRIS focussed his interest on the girl. Teucrete. A strange name, and as strange a being as these she lived among. He wondered idly about her racial background. Her father's origin was a mystery, and who could say what mate he had found on fecund Venus? Was his daughter one of those half-human mutants, or was she just what she seemed, a wilful and badly raised human girl? Ferris could only guess, and await further evidence of her intentions toward him.

But he liked the way she walked. Tall, straight, slender as a spear, and as poised. Pride was in her, and a hint of warped character in her frigid disdain of weakness or fear. Physically—but Ferris was no authority on feminine beauty. On the reservation women had been scarce, most of them neurotic virgins, or old. He had known

women since, but mostly the hard, cynical opportunists of the planetary frontier boomtowns. None to share a life with.

Vast perspectives of cages and tanks and pressure vats went off in all directions. He would not have imagined so much area covered by the establishment. It seemed limitless, and all its dimensions were oddly confusing. Intentionally so, since it was laid out in labyrinthine fashion. Unguided, a stranger could lose himself in a matter of minutes. It defied belief that a zoo of such colossal proportions could exist within the precincts of a city, even such a sprawling megalopolis as Castarona. But at last they were through the cage areas, which lined the periphery of the compound, and Teucrete led the men into a building of dazzling white stone.

"My father's laboratory," she explained. "Here we synthesize foods for the animals, and try with all our ingenuity to provide an approximate environment for them."

Her voice brought Ferris back to the present. "It won't work," he said. "Security squads will never wait for a warrant. Even if they do, what good is half an hour? They'll break down your gate and swarm through here like hunting bees."

Teucrete laughed scornfully. "Afraid, gamma-man?"

"If I were I wouldn't be here. But only a fool refuses to recognize danger."

"Relax," she advised. "They will break in, true. But there may be a little difficulty finding their way among the cages. It is a maze, as you saw. And the animals will give them some trouble. I am not forgetting the tracker, but the moon dogs and wireflies can confuse anything that operates on electronics. All we need is a slight delaying action. We can count on that."

"There is another exit?" asked Pao Chung eagerly.

Her laugh crystallized in tinkling fragments, like showering shards of glass. "Another exit, yes. The way my father goes when he hunts. If you have the nerve to take it! But compose yourself, Pao Chung. You will need supplies of food, water, air, special clothing. And . . . there is a price."

Hesitantly, unhappily, Pao Chung inquired the price.

"The way is dangerous," she said rapidly.

"You might not come back. And I must see that my father is protected. Give me an order on your bank or lawyer for all the evidence you have against him; for whatever crimes or stupidities he may have committed."

"How do you know such an order will be honored?" Pao Chung muttered speculatively. "Once I am free—"

The girl tossed her head till the bell of ebony hair swung dangerously. "It had better be honored," she warned crisply. "For there is only one way back . . . if you ever come back. And I can control it. I don't think you will like your surroundings well enough to remain there indefinitely."

Pao Chung bowed to the inevitable. Angel chuckled moodily, and Bat Ferris faced Teucrete with admiration on his pleasantly ugly features.

"Well done," he praised. "Is there a price for me?"

"No price to a man who likes animals. I sensed that in you as we passed the cages."

Impulsively, the girl leaned toward Ferris and forced her lips violently on his. "That is for luck, gamma-man. On the house, but the next one might cost you dearly. Watch yourself."

Ferris clung to the sanctuary of masculine silence. Pao Chung glowered sullenly, and Angel's amusement sent iridescent ripples glinting from his wings.

"How about me?" he demanded.

"No kiss, no price," she told him, "but a word of advice, mutant. Keep those wings out of revolving doors."

Angel grinned happily, his gargoyle face wrinkling into impossible contortions. "They are a nuisance."

Newly garbed and equipped, the men followed Teucrete from the building. Stopping to stuff Pao Chung's order into a some feminine idea of a safety-vault, not too safe in the company of lecherous males, Teucrete conducted her charges through a lovely formal garden that functioned by concealed hydroponics, and on into another built up area.

But this was no cubicle of stone or steel or plastic. It was a roofless structure of glass. Vertical panels of glass ran off beyond sight. Panels of all colors, all degrees of transparency. Some were as lucid as crystal, some

barely translucent, and more bent or mirrored to distort, reflect or refract light. All were tinted, some weakly, others violently stained. The place was stridently illuminated by concealed radi-floods. It was a solid mass of rainbow effects, a forest of crystal mirrors and shafts and flickering, glowing prisms.

One entered by a kind of airlock, or more accurately, a lightlock. There was no change in atmospheric pressure, but the density and beating force of sheer luminosity increased by squares and cubes as the travelers strode through linked cubes of glass.

They entered the light maze. Dazzling splendors beat upon them. Vision was overwhelmed by visible vibrations. They drowned in light.

IV

"DON'T touch anything," warned Teucete. "Exact alignment is important."

She stopped before a keyboard like the console of a gigantic organ. Behind it rose massed ranks of vacuum tubes, all glowing, humming, flickering. The girl's fingers skipped nimbly on the keys, and notes of sound rose in tinkling, chiming sprays from the shafts. Colors stormed and raged in the crystalline forest, running up and down the visible octaves of light. One sensed other scales beyond, in both upper and lower wavelengths. Glass panels and crystal shafts vibrated to sound and light, like tuning forks. They stirred, quivered, vanished, then reappeared. A tall man appeared among the shafts and strode toward the travellers.

"Khaljean!" said Pao Chung nervously.

It was sufficient introduction. There was uncanny resemblance between father and daughter, like two matched paintings in different keys. The animal man listened quietly, while Teucete explained the situation. He looked at Pao Chung and laughed. He shrugged.

"A bargain is a bargain," said Khaljean. "Perhaps I should go back to Venus and fabricate some gnawed bones to convince the police searching parties that the animals devoured you. All of you had better remain here and wait till I send for you."

"You are good at faked evidence," Pao Chung jibed bitterly.

"In a good cause, yes," agreed Khaljean

good-naturedly. "Even in a bad cause, this time. Stay here. You will be safer."

"Wait!" ordered Ferris.

Khaljean measured him mockingly. "Who are you to say?"

"I am a gamma-man," Ferris told him.

"That doesn't frighten me, youngster. So am I. Or was. Do you know the name Djevos Barian?"

Ferris blinked. "But Barian was hunted down and killed, his remains positively identified.

Khaljean smiled. "As Pao Chung said, I am good at faked evidence. I always had a skill with synthetics. A man thing I created lived long enough to be slaughtered in my place, and I had constructed him well, even to duplicating my fingerprints and brain patterns. Officially I am dead. But ten years ago Pao Chung found out about me. He has bled me systematically ever since. Until now."

"Shall I kill him for you?" asked Angel, with malicious joy in the thought. "Now that you have access to his evidence, his life can be only a menace to you."

Khaljean frowned. "I don't believe in killing. But sometimes Pao Chung has tempted me. No, let him live."

"So you are Barian?" said Ferris admiringly.

"Was Barian. I have become Khaljean. The real one was a small-time operator, dealing chiefly in dead animals. I was with him when he died. We were much alike in appearance. With plastic surgery, I became Khaljean. And I have made the name famous. You must be one of the seven recent escapees from the reservation. We will have much to talk about later."

"Not later," insisted Ferris. "Now. Where does this maze lead?"

Khaljean humored him. "Nowhere or anywhere. It's a dimensional short cut that can take you to any place in the solar universe, or even a few odd places in adjacent or parallel spacetime continuums. Is there somewhere you want to go?"

Ferris nodded soberly. "A place I must go. Now, if possible."

"Why?" Khaljean studied the younger man grimly.

"I'm not sure you could understand, since you left the gamma reservation so long ago.

I'll try to explain. Somewhere, there is a tool. Not that exactly, nor a machine either, but we call it that for lack of a term. In the old books of our library, there was mention of it. A description, with a hint of properties. It is something alien, a control placed on the destinies of group-man."

His voice droned on, speaking as if the subject were a lesson he had learned by rote. "Many times, man's social and political organization has painfully climbed the ladder toward a workable, civilized system, but always it has slipped and fallen back. The individual mind functions well, for the most part, but not so the group-mind. Any crowd is less honest, less efficient, and far less intelligent than its individual units. The larger the crowd, the greater the tangent, the possibilities for evil and injustice. In attempts to solve the problems of group relationships, man is worse than pitiful.

"Long study has convinced the gamma-people that this is not a mere accident. Outside influence warps men's thinking in groups, warps social and political organization. It seems as if group-man struggled hopefully to put together a complex jigsaw puzzle, in which many parts will fit badly into an infinity of possible relationships. The true fit is difficult to find, but even the law of averages should help in so many attempts. Time and time again, just as the puzzle is nearly completed, someone joggles the puzzler's elbow, and the pattern is destroyed.

"There is such a joggler, such an outside influence. Its existence was proved, its influence even measured. There are clues scattered through the old books. We know what it is, what it looks like, how it operates, but we have been powerless to counteract its influence. The warping hypnotic broadcasts keep throwing mankind back to chaos, when utopia is in sight. It is too strong to combat, and the source must be destroyed. By our solemn pact, my six friends and I bound ourselves to locate and smash this alien mechanism."

KHALJEAN licked his lips reflectively. "You interest me," he admitted. "I was once young enough to be idealistic myself. What is this alien monster you describe?"

"Not a monster in the ordinary sense.

Not a tool, nor quite even a machine. Living jewels, perhaps. At least radioactive false gems.

"Gas, probably radon, solidified under the incredible pressures in the heart of Jupiter. Solar Surveys knows about them, for they were seen once, and even handled by men. There is an article about them in the Encyclopaedia of the Solar Planets. In 2036, they were discovered, mined by cybernetic machinery. Then on their way to Mars, the ship carrying the jewels was sabotaged and wrecked. Wreckage and frozen bodies were discovered on the rogue asteroid Hidalgo, but the jewels were missing."

Pao Chung had shown growing interest in the conversation. He broke in to ask, "Stolen?"

"Stolen, perhaps. Possibly they disintegrated at the time of the wreck, or they may have transmuted into something unrecognized by the searchers. They may have become tenuous enough to sink through the surface of Hidalgo and recrystallized inside. But the evil influence continues. We believe that they are still there, still in existence, working their hidden evil, warping the brains of men, producing social and political chaos. Five of my friends have lost their lives searching for this menace. Possibly the sixth is dead, too, since he vanished into the unknown and has not been heard from.

"I tried, myself. Angel and I landed on Hidalgo and searched carefully. But Hidalgo is 'off limits' for spacemen. Solar Surveys sent the Space Patrol after us, and we fled before finishing our search. We were chased to Mars, traced and hunted to Venus. We crashed there, and while I tried to get money for new equipment, Angel got involved with Pao Chung. You know the rest. Now you see why I must go to Hidalgo."

Khaljean shook his head in sorrow. "I understand. But you could never find your way through the maze."

Ferris accused him with fanatical eyes. "You could help me to find my way."

"Not I. I am too old, and I am not sure that I approve of your meddling. Not that I would try to stop you, but don't count on help from me. How do you know that this alien machine is what you say? Its purpose may be good, not evil. Some higher intelligence may have placed it in our system as a

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governor to influence mankind, to shield man from his own follies. It may be a warning road sign to keep us from crashing into a dead end. Our utopias sound very dull to me, they may easily be a dead end for mankind. I like the interesting and amusing variations of chaos, so let me cling to them. Follow your destiny, if you will. I won't stop you."

Ferris looked pitifully young, but he stood his ground with absurd pride and courage.

"Right or wrong, I must try," he said evenly. "And I won't grant the right of alien interference. Man, too, has a right to work out his destiny, good or bad."

Angel spoke up eagerly for his partner. "I won't say I know what you're talking about, and maybe I'm too stupid and ignorant to understand. But as a victim of 'chaos' I don't appreciate it."

Pao Chung sneered. "One vote for law and order from the fallen Angel, if it can be believed. Like Khaljean, my preference is for chaos, as it furnishes more opportunities for a man of my interests. However, my soul revolts at this talk of destroying gems of presumably unique properties. They must have value. Perhaps you can dismantle this machine, without harming its parts. As a business man, with time on my hands, I would like to go with you and see if something can be arranged."

"I don't trust you," Ferris said frankly. "And I don't believe that the jewels can be salvaged. Come along if you want, I can't stop you. But don't try any tricks."

Pao Chung accepted the warning with bland indifference.

"Father!" called Teucrete. "Leave me your protective suiting."

Khaljean smiled with sad irony. "Are you making a choice?"

"Yes. I'm going with them. I know the way. I can control the maze and guide them safely back. I don't know if I believe in this fabulous machine, or jewels, or whatever. But I think I might learn to believe in . . . in him. It's something I'll have to find out."

Smiling, Khaljean stripped off his protective armor and yielded it to the girl. As an afterthought, he handed her his blaster.

"The choice is yours to make. But in such company, the blaster may come in handy."

Khaljean shook hands with Ferris and

Angel, though he avoided looking at Pao Chung.

To Ferris, he said, "Come back if you can. And look after my girl. In the meantime, I'll throw some gnawed bones to the police wolves, and we'll manufacture a new identity for you."

Without a farewell, Khaljean strode into the crystalline forest. His lonely figure paused to wave.

"Good hunting, father," Teucrete called after him.

She tripped keys at the console. Light quivered in painful vibrations. His figure became transparent, then dissolved. . . .

Absent-mindedly, Teucrete climbed into the suit of protective armor. Ferris helped her zip up the clumsy garments, then clasped her arm impulsively.

"I haven't the skill to say it properly—but thanks."

"I'll expect your skill to improve with experience," she said irritably, fixing the blaster gun securely in its spring clip.

Returning to the console, Teucrete worked out an elaborate composition on the keys. Tubes flared and flickered, flamed and faded. There was the humming and the bell-toned clamor like glass raindrops spattering on a ceramic floor.

"We have arrived," she whispered. It was then Pao Chung acted.

QUICK as a striking snake, he moved close beside the girl and snatched the blaster from its clip.

Backing away, he waved the weapon in wide sweeps to menace both Ferris and Angel at once.

Teucrete turned and cried out. Angel froze like a statue. Ferris started a rush, then thought better of it.

"New deal, I think," said Pao Chung brutally. "From here on I'll give the orders."

Angel chuckled ferociously. "You can't get both of us, Pao Chung. If we rush at once, you can kill one, but the other will get to you."

"Don't try it," warned Pao Chung, sweating but deadly.

"You keep talking of deals," continued Angel evenly. "Better make one with me. For the girl, and a third of the loot, I'll talk business with you."

"I want her myself," croaked Pao Chung.

"Neither of you will get me alive," said Teucrete.

Ferris moved a little, and the gun held steadily on him. He hesitated, glancing curiously at Angel. Light glinted from quivering wings. The gargoyle face grinned hideously. Heavy eyelids blinked in remembered signal.

"Now," snapped Ferris.

Ferris and Angel leaped, like two moving parts of the same machine. Angel was quicker. His powerful wings wafted him in a long, swift bound.

The blaster swerved, flamed, burst in deafening explosion. A reek of charred, disintegrating flesh and singed feathers filled the air.

Angel shrieked in torment as his legs vanished in crumbling ashes. Wings flailing, his body a maimed and blasted horror, he crashed down upon Pao Chung. The gun jerked from nerveless fingers and clattered on the floor. Its beam cut a tinkling swathe among the crystal shafts. Real droplets of half-molten crystal struck myriad bell-tones in falling.

Writhing and threshing in agony, Angel clung to his desperate purpose. Powerful clawlike hands circled Pao Chung's head and wrenched it off. The head rolled free like a ball as two snarled bodies sagged together in bloody horror.

Stricken, Ferris bent over his friend, trying hopelessly to help. The gargoyle lips parted. Dry husks of sound whistled from them.

"Go on. Smash the machine! But first, do

this job right—for me."

Trembling, Ferris recovered the blaster gun, cut down its intensity, then thrust the blunt muzzle deep into the striped fur, where rich crimson now mingled with the other gaudy dyes. Blinking his eyes shut, he pressed the stud. Angel writhed and was gone.

Ferris did not look back. Hand in hand with Teucrete he walked slowly toward the forest of crystal shafts. There was much damage, and his heart quailed from the task ahead.

"Can you still find the way?" he asked numbly.

"I'm not sure," the girl faltered. "I'm not sure we can ever get back. Exact alignment is so terribly important."

"We can try," said Ferris grimly.

Hand in hand, young men and women, with the dream still fresh within them, will always seek the ultimate answer to the ultimate questions. It may be, of course, that there is no ultimate answer, and that even the quest is a delusion. But Teucrete and Ferris, with the flame of a new love burning fiercely between them, believed that it was important to find and destroy some alien thing that warped men's minds. Others may think only of building a life together, as a pledge to the future, but not Teucrete and Ferris. Time for that later, they hoped.

For the moment, they might, just possibly, make mankind's tomorrows a little brighter, or more hopeful.

Hand in hand they walked together to the crystal maze, and entered. Perhaps they found something. . . .

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TASK OF KAYIN

By WILLIAM MORRISON

From out beyond the second sun he came; a fugitive from a dead and sterile world . . . seeking solace, friends, a home, on Earth—a planet of even greater terrors.

THE sensation of which he was most conscious was that of loneliness. He was no longer very much afraid, and sometimes he even thought that his enemies back home were no longer hunting for him. But in the midst of these strange creatures he learned that there was one thing worse than open hostility, and that was indifference. They had no more interest in him than they had in each other, and even though their indifference increased his own chances for safety, it was a chilling thing none the less.

He knew that though they were like him superficially, they were intensely different within. He stood at a street corner trying to fathom the difference, while the crowds surged about him, buffeting him from side to side. They seemed to have no idea of personal dignity. He still understood their language only imperfectly, and spoke it with difficulty, but he had learned, in a primitive way, to read their faces, and during this time of day, at least, their faces told of a strain and fear all their own, of an uncertainty even greater than his. They were going home from work, and they were afraid of countless trifles—that something unpleasant might happen, that they might not get seats on their conveyances, that bad news might greet them when they arrived.

He stared with fascination at a heap of newspapers spread out on the corner stand. He could guess the purpose of these layers of white sheets covered with black or red symbols, but he could not yet interpret them, and he had no idea whether any one had seen or reported his ship. It was almost certain that some one had observed a shooting star, but the chances were very much against any observation having been made of the star's slow, dark drift to earth. At any rate, he had concealed his ship among the growth

of tall native plants, and some day he would find time to repair the relatively minor damage he had sustained, and continue his journey.

Meanwhile, he had to make up his mind what to do here. His original store of food had been exhausted a week before as these creatures counted time, and despite the fact that his metabolic requirements were low, he had long needed to eat again. The food that was exhibited in many stores was of a kind strange to him, but from the very structure and behavior of individuals who ate it, he knew that it was of the right chemical composition. Examining it cautiously with a small analyzer held close to his eye, he noted that at least it contained none of the more dangerous poisons. It would do, if he could obtain it.

But he must obtain it in a manner that these creatures considered legal, not as he had obtained his clothes. He recalled how absurdly different his own clothes had been, constructed to fit a creature whose morphology was so much unlike theirs. He had taken over a suit from a man he had met driving on a dark country road, not too close to the ship. He had stopped the car and put the man to sleep without difficulty, but there must have been a great outcry after his victim had awakened to find himself cold and naked in the driver's seat.

He hadn't minded, for he had already left the place where the incident had occurred. But he wanted no hue and cry raised here. Although under other conditions he would have minded their hostility no more than their indifference, he knew that hostility now might very seriously limit his freedom to act.

He listed the things he had to do. He had to find food and shelter, learn their language



and customs, and as quickly as possible, their alphabet. He had to acquire their manner of thought and feeling so well that he could blend with them not only superficially, but psychologically as well. He had to—

A ROUGH shoulder caught him on the chest and spun him half around. A rough voice, more a snarl than anything else, said, "Whatsa matter, ya blind?"

The way the words were run together confused him, but he had listened keenly, and he knew the phrase that was required in such situations. He said politely, but almost unintelligently, "Excuse. I sorry."

"Foreigner, huh? Why don't ya go back where ya came from?"

This was the first person who had spoken to him in his new world. The encounter left him angry and contemptuous, but it was not to be long before he learned that the individual he had been privileged to meet was not wholly typical.

He moved along, alert to observe and to learn, but entirely without aim so far as an ultimate destination was concerned. He noted that the nature of the streets he traversed changed subtly with every intersection. The primitive, but well constructed buildings that had lined them soon gave way to even more primitive, dilapidated, and filthy structures. It was clear that they had rich and poor here, and that he was approaching the dwellings of the poor.

He heard a rhythmic sound in the street, as of a percussion instrument, and following it, found a female of the prevailing species, dressed somewhat differently from the other females, and pounding on a hollow cylinder of fairly large diameter. Other, more piercing instruments, added sounds of their own, and then voices were lifted in song. He lingered, fascinated, and wished only that he had a sound-recorder to take permanent note of the strange music.

He was not the only one who lingered. Half a dozen dilapidated males had gathered, attracted like him by the rhythmic noise, and after a female had ended a strange exhortation which he did not fully understand, they all followed the company of musicians into a ramshackle building. Inside, he listened to other exhortations, and then had food thrust upon him.

It was a bowl of soup, the first nutrient of this strange planet that he had eaten. The taste, as well as the quick ocular analysis he made, indicated that it was deficient in many of the chemicals that he needed for his own nutrition, but at least it had energy value, and he imbibed it slowly and thoughtfully. When he had finished, they asked him if he wanted more, but he said politely, "No, thank."

The young woman who had offered it to him said, "Oh, you're a refugee, I suppose. Driven out of your native country?"

He nodded.

"Don't you have any friends here?"

He shook his head, and said, "No, thank."

"That's too bad. You look as if you hadn't eaten for a long time. Your face is awfully thin."

"Yes, thin." He did not explain that for a member of his race he was not thin at all.

"What's your name, please?"

"Name? What?"

"How do people call you?"

"Kayin. My name Kayin."

"Kane. That's rather a strange name for a foreigner. Well, don't worry, Mr. Kane, we'll take care of you."

Her attitude helped erase the hostile encounter of an hour before. When they finally showed him a cot, one of a row on which many men were already stretched out, he tried to reconcile the contradictory kinds of behavior he had met, and decided that the psychology of this race would prove more complicated than he had at first believed.

The cot was extremely inconvenient, but somehow he managed to stretch out on it like the others. He slept little, and in the morning, when he awoke, it was with strained muscles and a sense of fatigue, but he was eager to see more of the world on which he found himself, and he left the next day, to continue his wanderings. During the hours that followed, he covered many miles of ground. With ears and mind open, he picked up more and more words, and by evening he was fairly confident in his ability to make himself understood in almost any situation.

He went hungry that day, but in the evening he slept much more comfortably at the foot of an old tree on a vacant lot. Far above

he could see the star from which he had come. He stared at it impersonally for a short time, wondering whether he would see his own planet again. Then he fell into a half-sleep, one that rested him, though still leaving his senses partly alert.

He was becoming more accustomed to the rather short day-and-night rhythm of the planet, and he awoke at the first faint signs of daylight before anyone had noticed him.

That day he encountered groups of men congregated about dingy little buildings on a dingy street. He found that they were seeking employment, and knowing that the best way to learn about a strange race was to study the manner in which the people worked, he joined one of the groups. But there was not a single occupation with regard to which he could claim experience, and he was hired finally to do heavy, but unskilled labor, at eighty cents an hour.

The work was more difficult for him than for the others. He looked like them, but they had muscles which he simply did not possess. He was so clumsy at lifting rocks that another man, with whom he was working, said finally in exasperation, "Didn't you ever lift anything before? Look, pal, do it like this. Bend at the knees, see? That's it, like this—no, you're doing it all wrong!"

IT WAS a nuisance, it might even be dangerous, to be stared at so closely. The fact was that his knees simply would not bend as human knees did. They were jointed in quite another fashion, and no surface similarities could conceal the fact that in action there was all the difference of two worlds between them.

He said, "Sorry. I—injured."

"Oh, can't bend them, huh? This is no job for you, pal."

"Am stranger. Know not—what else."

"Yeah, it's tough."

He returned to his work again, this time warmed by the other's sympathy, and less uneasy about being observed. And as he worked, he thought sardonically of what they would think on his home planet if they knew.

He was sure that his enemies would have roared with laughter. Here was Kayin, the one they had feared for his brilliant mind, for his knowledge of science, for his prac-

tical skill. They had outwitted him—with the odds on their side, it was true—driven him a hunted creature past strange stars, and forced him to come to ground again in the guise of one of the meanest of a mean and unintelligent race. And even in the humble position to which he had been reduced, he could not hold up his end of the work.

He clenched his jaws grimly at the thought, and the very motion made him realize that in no way was he like the others, that even so simple a matter as the number and shape of his teeth might give him away. Unintelligent as they were, once they took the trouble to look with some care, they would know a creature who was not one of them.

On the second day of work he did arouse suspicion, but at first not from the other workers. The creature that bared its teeth and barked at him was a dog. For a time Kayin found the animal's attention embarrassing. He threw a stone at the beast, but it ran only a short distance, and stopped to bark again. He had an idea of what the trouble was. That day he had replaced his worn trousers by a new and baggy pair of overalls, not yet saturated with the scent of human beings, and the dog had noticed his own faint but strange odor. Now it was making a nuisance of itself, and drawing everyone's attention to him.

"That mutt don't like you, Mac," said a foreman who passed by.

"Funny about dogs, the way they bark at some people," someone laughed.

Kayin threw another stone, but the beast dodged and continued to bark. His audience was growing now, and Kayin's skin began to twitch nervously, in a way that itself might have drawn an audience if they had been in a mood to notice such details of behavior. "I patted cat this morning," he said apologetically. "Crazy dog smells cat."

He would have them all staring at him if this went on much longer, and he knew that he had to act quickly. Looking around him, he spied a compressed air hose lying on the ground. He picked it up, turned on the air, and directed the nozzle at the dog. The blast knocked the animal head over heels, and sent him howling on his way. Everyone laughed, and Kayin turned back to his work in relief. But from now on he

knew that he must wear no new clothes.

As the work progressed, his attention turned from the immediate tasks at hand, and he began to wonder what its purpose was. There seemed to be hundreds of men, all engaged in menial tasks, all part of some greater overall plan. He began to wonder, too, if people who could make such plans could be so unintelligent as he had first assumed. Or was it simply that their intelligence had not developed, that they lacked the background of science to make the most of their minds, to use the resources their planet possessed?

A rough voice, almost the twin of that first rough voice of two days before, growled, "Hey, you, wake up and get movin'. Whaddya think you're gettin' paid for?"

He swung his pick without looking up. The foreman had no idea that the tall foreigner he knew as Kane was staring at him curiously with tiny camouflaged eyes that quite literally grew in the back of the strangely shaped head, trying to understand what made the human being tick.

By the end of a week Kayin was confident that he knew the language well enough to start reading it. He went to a public school which he found was open in the evenings, and there joined a class where someone explained the alphabet, and made clear to foreigners that English was a language full of traps and pitfalls. Kayin absorbed the information eagerly, but after the third lesson he found the pace much too slow, and did not return. He had never before encountered a language of so strange a structure, and the actual making of the sounds gave him trouble, but the basic principles of language study were as valid here as on his home planet, and he learned rapidly. By the end of a month he could read.

By the end of the same month he had learned, too, the nature of the project on which he was working. On several occasions, the engineer in charge had passed by him to exchange a few words with the foreman and once with the man who had ordered the building.

The words had been significant. There could be no mistake, for Kayin had come across them in his reading. "Laboratory" had a very definite meaning. And there were

such expressions as "incubation tanks," and "thermostat controls." All in all, enough to let him know that they were engaged in constructing a plant for the manufacture of biochemical substances.

He knew that there were biochemical plants already in existence, scattered over the civilized part of the planet, and the thought of great danger did not occur to him. But he continued, as the men around him would have put it, to keep his ears open, and as time went on he became more and more disquieted.

MEANWHILE, his relations with the people among whom he worked became almost human. They greeted him every day as one of themselves, asked casual questions about the place from which he had come and the way he had lived, and accepted the answers as if with a quiet confidence that he was telling the truth. Once, in an access of good feeling, one of them had gone so far as to slap him amicably on the shoulder, and Kayin had experienced agony such as he had never felt before. But he managed to conceal the pain, and even to laugh weakly. He made sure, however, that a similar incident would never happen again. Whenever someone approached him too closely, he opened his extra eyes very slightly, ready to step aside at the touch of a too friendly hand.

He had not realized how much his own attitude toward them had changed until the day an accident occurred. A large shelf of rock had unexpectedly turned up to block the excavation of a wide pit, and it had been necessary to shatter it with dynamite. But the explosive did not at first go off, and one of the men had gone back to see what was wrong. He had been just in time to be knocked down by the blast itself, and to be covered by the mass of dirt and broken rock that slid into the excavation.

It was Kayin who ran for him first, digging frantically away at the smothering mass, without regard for the fragments that continued to rain down upon him. And after he had reached the man, who was unconscious, but still breathing, it was Kayin who had wondered why on this Earth he had taken the risk for the sake of a creature who meant so little to him. There was an-

other risk as well, he found, when they summoned a doctor to treat the injured man, and someone suggested that Kayin had been injured too. But Kayin quickly shrugged off the idea that he needed treatment, and went back at once to his work. He wanted no doctor discovering what unusual arms and legs and internal organs he had.

In the days that followed he continued to wonder at himself. Working together with these men, he had changed. But he must be careful, he knew, not to change too far. They had only, he was certain, to see him as he was, to realize his difference from them, and their friendliness would change to hate, causing them to turn from him with fear and loathing.

The building had reached the stage of scaffolding, and he was still at work. It was now that he learned the full truth about the project which was soon to come into operation.

He was on the outside of the building, and two of the men in charge were nearby. One of them, shrewd and elderly, had financed the building. The other, in his thirties, was the scientist who had invented the process. They were speaking in low tones, tones which no human being standing in Kayin's position would have been able to understand.

"You're sure, Blayson, that there's no danger?" the older man was saying.

The scientist smiled. "There's always some danger, Mr. Lymer, especially when you try something new. But there's nothing we shouldn't be able to control."

"I still don't think that you know too much about what you're doing."

"I've admitted that myself. But we get results, don't we? We'll corner the world market, Mr. Lymer. Name your antibiotic and we'll make it. And in addition to anything now being sold, we'll have dozens that nobody has even imagined. I think I've given you enough evidence to convince you of that."

"I suppose you have. But this use of cosmic rays makes me uneasy. You still don't know enough about them."

It was at this point that Kayin's third and fourth eyes, usually so completely concealed, popped wide open in surprise and

terror. It was fortunate that no one took the trouble to look at him at that moment.

The younger man was saying confidently, "We'll control them. All we need to know is that they're high energy, higher than anything we can produce here on earth, and that we can concentrate them in a way no one else can. There's nothing to fear, nothing that ordinary precautions shouldn't enable us to handle."

Nothing, Kayin thought, but the danger of depopulating most of a planet. His mind went back to what had happened on the second planet of his own sun, what had almost happened on the fourth planet. Within the space of a few hundred centads of time, the second planet, with its population of four billion, had lost every inhabitant, and become a sterile monument of a dead civilization. Only the warning of what had already taken place had enabled the second planet to survive.

And in this place too, disaster would strike quickly. Kayin had begun to read more and more, and he knew what was taking place here. Science had developed quickly, but sporadically. Vast regions had remained untouched by it, masses of people knew nothing of it but the name and the fact that it could perform miracles. True, they had learned that certain discoveries might lead to disaster as well as to the improvement of their lives, but they still failed to test their discoveries fully before using them, they still failed to exercise the necessary controls.

The young man, Blayson, had made his discovery ahead of its proper time. At the rate at which human science was progressing, thought Kayin, at least a hundred years would have to pass before such a discovery could be considered safe. At the present stage, it simply could not be controlled. The concentrated cosmic rays would, as Blayson evidently anticipated, cause tremendous mutations in living organisms, in the molds and mycetes of different kinds, it would lead to the manufacture of useful antibiotics. But they would also lead to the production of entirely new forms of sub-microscopic life, forms not susceptible to ordinary methods of sterilization, forms that would multiply with inexorable speed. These forms produced from bits of human tissue would inevitably

be deadly to human beings and related species.

He himself, thought Kayin, possessed of a different body chemistry, might escape. But he would be the only intelligent creature to do so. And after the viruses had done their work, the planet, in its desolation and sterility, would resemble the second planet of his own star.

If he had learned of the imminence of disaster at the time he first arrived, he would hardly have been affected. He would have hated to see a race disappear. He had the scientist's desire to keep any race, even the least useful, alive so that he might study it, and at the very worst, write an article about it. But now—and this he realized almost to his amazement—he felt practically human himself. It must be the way he was living and working, the way the others treated him on the job. He did not want to see them annihilated.

HE WAS the only one to know the danger. He realized at once that he could tell no one. Blayson and Lymer had eyes only on the fortunes they intended to make, and they would have refused to believe anything that stood in the way of those fortunes. Nor could he go to anyone else. There would be questions—

He imagined himself trying to inform the Mayor of the city. Some underling would be sure to meet him. "You say there's danger, Mr. Kayin? That how you pronounce it? Foreign-sounding name. Where'd you come from?"

He would have to invent answers in advance for every possible embarrassing question. And then would come the most embarrassing of all:

"How do you know there's danger?"

There was no answer to that. Could he say that he had worked in the same field of research himself? Or could he give them the example of what had happened on another planet?"

It was a problem that he would have to solve by himself. He racked his head, and found no simple solution. He had his optical analyzer, and one or two additional trifles like it, but there was no special apparatus he could use, no weapons. Outside of his scientific knowledge and his non-human

brain, he had only the same weapons as the human beings themselves. And these were hardly enough to put an end for good to a project on which so many human beings had built their hopes.

The buildings approached completion, the laboratory equipment began to be installed. And then, finally, when delay was no longer possible, on the eve of the very day that was to see the plant put into operation, Kayin acted.

He knew that until work actually began there would be but a single night watchman, and it was this man at whom he struck first. A single carefully aimed blow with a padded club produced unconsciousness. Kayin did not strike hard, but he struck hard enough. As the watchman fell, Kayin seized the man, bound and gagged him.

Then he entered the building and began to destroy.

He started with the cosmic ray collector, working quietly and efficiently, and concentrating on the electronic and magnetic parts. These had been ordered long before the building itself had been begun. They would be hard to replace.

He passed on to the giant incubator vats, and finally turned his attention to the collection of formulas which reposed in the files. These were important, but he knew that they were not enough. The most important formulas of all lay in the mind of the man who had developed the process, and that was, for the moment at least, beyond him. What Kayin was doing now was playing for time.

He was setting a match to the papers of the last file when he heard a voice. More time had passed than he realized, and they had come early on this day that was to have seen the beginning of a great enterprise.

They must already have noted the absence of the watchman. Now he heard a gasp from Lymer, a groan that must have come from Blayson. Then there was cursing, slow, bitter and steady. Then footsteps, and Lymer was standing at the door of the office and shouting, "Here he is!"

Blayson was shouting to someone outside, and Kayin knew that in a moment the entire building would be swarming with people. He promptly tossed one of the files at Lymer, saw the man stumble and fall in an effort to avoid being hit, and was past the door

before the enraged man could scramble to his feet again.

Then he was in the great incubation room, with its monstrous vats, heading for the opposite end. But before he could reach it, a door swung open. A policeman appeared, and shouted, "Hey, you—stop!"

He dashed out through a side door into a small control room. He locked the door behind him. He heard a club pound furiously upon it, and the pounding ceased as the policeman decided against a further waste of time here. Kayin ran to the other door. As he did so the knob turned. He threw all his weight against the door and turned the key. Men pounded on both doors, and he looked around for windows. There were none. He was locked in.

He heard Blayson's voice, "Open up! You can't get away!"

There was, it was true, no way out. But Kayin said calmly, "Stay away, or I'll blow up the building."

AFTER the destruction he had already accomplished, they had no way of knowing that he was bluffing. The pounding stopped. Through the door he heard the whispered sounds of consultation. Then Blayson's voice again, "Come out. We won't hurt you."

"I realize that."

"You realize—"

"You think that I am afraid, do you not?"

There was surprise in the tones of Blayson's reply. "You don't sound crazy, but—"

"But what other reason could I have had for destroying so much valuable equipment?"

He heard Lymer say, "Over a hundred thousand dollars' worth. That cosmic ray collector cost at least that."

A policeman's voice: "You saw him, Mr. Lymer. Recognize him?"

"No, never saw him before in my life."

Blayson shouted again, this time with unconcealed anger, "Come on out."

"With pleasure. But first I should like to talk to you."

"You'll talk later."

"No." He knew that later they would not listen to him, and he realized that if he could convince Blayson of the danger of the project, his battle would be won. "Do

you want to know why I did so much damage, Mr. Blayson?"

"You've already answered that."

"No, I am not insane. It is you who are failing to use your mind properly. Your method is extremely dangerous."

"How do you know?"

"I have made similar studies."

"That's absurd. No one on earth has done anything like this."

"I didn't mention *Earth*," thought Kayin. Aloud, he said patiently, "You are mistaken. Your experiments are not new, and it is known—" he did not say where it was known—"it is known that they can lead to disaster. They can produce microorganisms of a virulence never before seen here."

"You're just imagining things!"

"I do not imagine. At this period, your discovery is of too treacherous a nature to be used."

Blayson was silent, and Kayin hoped that he was thinking of something else than breaking down the door.

"You will not be the first, Mr. Blayson, to have surpressed a discovery of so great significance."

"I don't believe you. Open the door."

"In a moment. But think of what I have said."

"Open the door."

"Half a moment now. You do not care to listen further?"

A policeman growled, "He's stalling. We'll break it open."

"No need for that," said Kayin. "I shall come out. Perhaps if I speak to you face to face you will believe me."

He removed the jacket and shirt and tie to which he had become so accustomed these past few months. He stretched his muscles freely, and smiled a bitter smile to himself. He said, "The door opens outward. Please give room."

He turned the key in the lock, and slammed the door open. Then he leaped forward.

He could hear the shouts of horror, he could see them standing there petrified. It was a reaction that he had counted on. A policeman fired his revolver, but so excitedly that every bullet missed, while he yelled, "It's not human. It's not human!"

The gravity was a little too great here for

him to do any real flying, but at least his wings, unfolded at last, could take him high into the air in the great room, terrifying and confusing them. As he slowly floated down, he could see them racing around madly. He headed for the door to an outer room. A policeman who was standing in his path could not move his bulk out of the way in time. Kayin crashed into him and sent him sprawling. Then, from behind him, another policeman aimed a blow with the butt of his gun. With his extra eyes Kayin saw what was happening, and a blow of his great wings knocked the policeman down.

Then he was running down the corridor, using his wings to give him a little extra speed. The door through which he had just come swung open again, and a bullet sang past him, tearing into the non-fleshy part of his wing. He hardly felt it.

He was outside.

The noise of the shooting had spread the alarm. Another policeman came running, took one look at him, closed his eyes, and swayed there. Kayin seized the man's own club and hit him over the head with it. He dragged the unconscious body into a deep, clean, concrete-lined pit that had been reserved for some of the dangerously radioactive byproduct that he was now sure they would never make. In the dark of the pit, he stripped the policeman of the uniform. The man was broad across the shoulders, and the uniform fitted nicely across Kayin's wings.

Now he leaped out of the pit, adding his yells to those of the others. A car, the one in which Blayson and Lymer had arrived, was standing parked at the edge of the yard, and he slipped into it. He was out of the yard before they realized what was happening.

But a policeman's uniform, he knew, was too conspicuous. A mile away, he stopped a puzzled truck driver, threatened the man with his revolver, and drove away a moment later with an extra, less conspicuous suit of clothes. He turned on the radio and learned, as he had suspected, that an alarm for him had already been broadcast.

He left the car on a deserted side road, and changed into his truck driver's outfit. He knew enough now about human customs to feel momentarily safe. And he knew enough

also to realize that they would institute a nationwide search for a strange creature with wings. He would not be safe for long. He had to get back to his ship, of which, fortunately, they knew nothing. They might suspect, but they could have no idea of where he had hidden it.

THAT night, still dressed as a truck driver, he broke into a factory that made electrical appliances. When he left, he had with him most of what he needed for repairs.

It was two days later that he reached his ship with a supply of food. He hoped that he had been unobserved, but he could not be sure. He set to work, using the Earth-made supplies to patch up, in makeshift fashion, the damage caused by the crash.

Another two days and the ship would operate. He was short on fuel, but if he looked for it, he knew he could find enough to send him on his way and leave this planet for good.

He realized now that he didn't want to leave. In the days he had spent here, he had gradually lost some of his feeling of loneliness. Almost despite themselves, these human beings had made him feel like one of them. Their planet would never take the place of the one he had left, but in many ways it had become a second home to him.

He had made it uninhabitable for himself. If he had said nothing, done nothing, then no one would have suspected, and he would have been allowed to stay—until disaster struck them all.

At least he had delayed that. The radio that night brought him the news that Blayson, who had been slightly injured in the struggle, had been taken to a hospital, his mind temporarily gone under the shock of what had happened. He would be unable, for the time, to reconstruct what Kayin had destroyed. Lymer, disheartened by the loss, had announced that he had no plans for rebuilding the factory. Despite their stupidity, Kayin had won them a respite.

He had won nothing for himself. The following day he heard warning sounds, and saw groups of men closing in around the ship. He was pleased to see that, despite all difficulties, they had traced the path he had taken. They were not so stupid after all.

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He went into his ship, and the door slid shut. Night was falling, and in the darkness the ship leaped upward at a sharp angle. Now there would be hundreds of people who saw the shooting star, but this time a star that shot upward.

He rose to a height of twenty miles, and remained at that level, cruising slowly. Far above, he could see through the viewplates the star—Vega, they called it here—which was his native sun. Already an exile from his homeland, he was now being exiled from his second home.

Suddenly he knew that being exiled once was enough. He was tired of fleeing through space, tired of making friends and then being forced to leave them. He had made a home here, and here he would stand and fight.

Below him, the surface of the planet was now rocky and deserted. The ship began to

sink. It was still dark, and the vessel came to rest slowly and inconspicuously upon a craggy peak where there was little danger that any human being would stumble upon it. Far below he could see the outline of a town, picked out of the darkness by light reflected from clouds above. Looking through a distance viewer he could even distinguish the individual lights, and he was able to read a sign that flaunted its message boldly alongside a bridge: WELCOME TO HARDENDALE.

He smiled, and said softly, in the language that was no longer strange to him, "I accept the invitation."

Stretching his wings, he parachuted down through the darkness to level ground, prepared to become once more a member by adoption of the human race. And this time, as he walked cautious and alone through the night, he no longer felt lonely.

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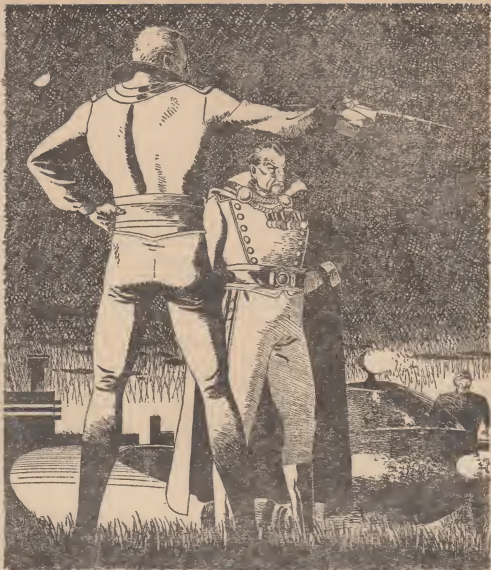
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By W. BRADFORD MARTIN

*Out beyond hyper-space soared the transmuted Terran
—to Trygon II—where all mad men die
willingly for the Empress.*

IT COULD be said that the Resistance began at the moment the great spaceship from Trygon II first appeared as an unknown body on the photographic plates at

Palomar, for while the astronomers propounded theories as to its origin and composition, it entered our atmosphere and came to earth on the runways of Idlewild



Airport, just outside of what was then New York City. Nothing need be said of the panic caused by its coming.

Three Trygonians went immediately in a ground car to the United Nations Building in the city. The records of their pronouncement have, unfortunately, been lost, but from subsequent events it has been established that they granted Terra fifteen days to submit to Trygonia.

Then they returned to space.

Fifteen days later they returned and crushed the feeble opposition they encountered.

ROSS SAVAGE was tired of seeing nothing but white; the walls and ceiling of his small, windowless room, the few pieces of utilitarian furniture and the sheets covering the narrow bed, which sagged under the weight of his muscularly massive, six-foot five-inch frame. He was tired too, of the white bandages on his hands and, although he could not see them, the white bandages that swathed his head and face, leaving only slits for his eyes and mouth.

Today is the day, he thought. Why don't they come? As if in answer to his unspoken question the door latch clicked. Savage

turned his head stiffly to watch the door open. As it swung wide the doctor entered, followed by General Strathmore and two nurses guiding a wheeled tray.

"It's time to take them off," the doctor said. No one answered, but Savage felt his hands grow sweaty in their wrappings.

As the group reached the bed a nurse handed the doctor a pair of surgical scissors. He bent over Savage as he said, "We'll take the hands first."

There was no sound other than the snip-snip of the scissors as the doctor carefully cut through the gauze. Finally the sound stopped and Savage looked at his hands. They were white and soft, but there were no scars to betray the fingerprint change.

The doctor permitted himself a small smile of satisfaction, but the room was pregnant with tension as he turned his attention to the gauze covering Savage's head.

The snip-snip came again as the cold steel slid slowly over his skin. An eternity passed before the sound again ceased and a nurse carefully removed the freed gauze. For a long moment there was no sound and Savage looked anxiously from face to face and tried to interpret what he read there. The nurses stared in disgust and horror while the doctor looked satisfied. The General beamed.

"Beautiful job," the General said finally, and the doctor nodded in agreement.

"Let me see," Savage croaked through stiff lips.

A nurse took the hand mirror from the bedside table and held it in front of him. From the glass the bearded face of a Trygonian stared at him; there was no mistaking the narrow chin, the high, broad cheekbones and aquiline nose.

ALMOST a month later Savage stood at attention in the General's office. He wore the flamboyantly brilliant uniform of a Trygonian officer. Medals and orders sparkled on his breast. His new face wore a sardonic scowl.

"Fleet captain Choon reporting, sir," he said, and the General's stern face relaxed to a half smile.

"Sit down, Ross," the General invited and indicated the chair beside his desk. "So you're ready to go, eh? How do you like yourself?"

"Well," Savage smiled, "I have to keep myself from going for my gun when I see myself in a mirror, but outside of that I'm pretty used to it by now."

"We've made tremendous strides in the twenty years since we went underground. I guess it was the pressure. But Phillips told me that by every test you're a Trygonian. I hope however, that you haven't become one emotionally. That was the one thing we were afraid of when we decided to use the Ceregraph. Choon died, of course, but how was it for you?"

"Nothing to it, sir. I just seemed to go to sleep and when I awoke I knew everything Choon knew, but Doctor Phillips almost drove me crazy testing me to find out whether I'd picked up Choon's mental outlook. Apparently, though, the Ceregraph transfers only knowledge, not emotions."

"Thank the Lord," exclaimed the General heavily.

"I want to thank you for this opportunity," Savage said. "I've wanted to do something concrete against them since they killed my parents twenty years ago."

"Whether or not you can do something concrete is up to you." The General was stern again. "You were chosen because of your physical and mental qualifications. You just happened to be Choon's exact physical double. Fortunately he was rather shorter than the average Trygonian."

"Doctor Phillips told me that, except for size, there is no anatomical difference between the Trygonians and ourselves," said Savage. "It is his theory that the highest intelligent life form on any planet suitable to the evolution of intelligent life will be a humanoid type."

"That may be possible, but exact duplication seems strange," the General said. "Although I'm interested in Trygon I haven't had a chance to read your report. I think you have time to fill me in on some of the details. Why do they call their planet Trygon II?"

"Trygon is the name of their sun," explained Savage. "Their system consists of three planets, Trygon I, II and III. Until about seven hundred years ago only the middle planet, Trygon II was inhabited by their race. Then they discovered a method of utilizing Solar energy directly and what

amounted to a social revolution took place.

"At the time, Trygon II was divided into a number of countries. The discovery was made in a country called Czur and with it Czur conquered the rest of the planet. They used pretty brutal methods, but they welded the entire planet into one country using one language and having one ruler.

"Space was the next step and they explored the other planets. The innermost one was hot and lush and eventually they tamed it and now they grow all their food there. The third planet, as might be expected was cold and bare, but it was fantastically rich in minerals. They transferred their mining and manufacturing to the third planet, leaving Trygon II the center of trade, the rich and the military.

"There are a number of commercial spaceports but only one military. It's near the capital city, named Czur in honor of the country that started it all.

"Two hundred years ago they ventured into deep space. Earth is the fifth humanoid planet they have conquered."

"That's quite a history," said the General. "What form of government do they have?"

"Autocratic. The Emperor is the supreme authority, but the High Commissioner works out the details and sees that the orders are carried out. All military matters are in the hands of the Emperor and in that respect the High Commissioner is just a figure head. As you can imagine there is a good deal of intrigue."

"Yes, I can see that there would be," agreed the General. He glanced at the wall clock. "But it's almost H-hour."

"Are there any last orders?" Savage asked.

The General smiled wryly. "It might be said that there were no first orders. You're on your own, Ross. We don't know what you can do, but if you can get into one of their intrigue groups you should be able to do something. The rank of Fleet captain carries a lot of weight. All I can say is be careful and do your best.

"The skeleton crew is moving out and the station is going on automatic as soon as you leave."

Savage stood up, saluted and then the General took his hand and shook it warmly. Savage turned and walked out of the office without looking back.

Outside two guards waited and they walked together down a long hall to a bare, cement-walled room. There was only one way to make sure that he would look like an escaped prisoner and they had to make sure. So they fought and when they were through, his uniform was a sad caricature of its former splendor and he had the beginnings of a black eye.

He shook hands with the two men and then went up three flights of stairs where the Trygonian patrol ship waited. There was no one in sight as he climbed into the ship and roared away, but anti-aircraft guns opened up almost immediately. Savage smiled grimly as he saw the shells burst a safe distance from him.

THEN, as he was almost out of range, the ship lurched from the blast of a near miss. A hole appeared in the hull beside him and he saw his sleeve rip and redden as a fragment cut across his arm. He switched on the automatics and cursed the unknown gunner as he crudely bandaged the flesh wound with part of his already torn shirt. At least, he thought finally, it would add verisimilitude to his story.

An hour later he crash-landed on the outskirts of what had once been Denver, Colorado, and what was now the Trygonian Capital for North America. Then he settled down to wait for the Trygonians.

Something less than ten minutes passed before a ground car skidded to a stop near the wrecked ship. Two Trygonian soldiers jumped out with hand-blasters at the ready. More sedately, as befitted his rank, a Senior Lieutenant followed and Savage walked briskly to meet him. The Lieutenant eyed Savage dubiously for a brief moment and then snapped to the salute.

"At ease," Savage ordered. "Take me to Headquarters immediately."

"Yes, sir," the Lieutenant replied and followed Savage into the car. It was evident that he was wondering why such an exalted personage as a full Fleet captain should appear in a single place patrol ship and in this condition, but Savage let him wonder. The soldiers reentered the car and they sped away with a full-throated roar.

Savage remained grimly silent as they roared through the Trygonian capital. Try-

gonians were everywhere, but still Earthmen predominated, and Savage wondered what had induced them to remain. There were probably many reasons, he decided, for man in spite of everything must live somewhere and he must eat. After twenty years they were probably used to it.

He had lived briefly in Denver as a child, but nothing remained now of the city he had known. The old buildings had been blasted during the invasion and starkly functional ferro-concrete had replaced the rubble. At the very site of the old State Capitol the Trygonians had raised a towering structure to house the offices of the High Command.

They filed into the building and, as the Lieutenant had done, the honor guard eyed him dubiously before snapping to attention. Savage strode haughtily between them and finally, after a succession of guards and lesser officers, he was ushered into the presence of Vice Admiral Harna lor-Harna.

"Fleet captain Choon," he announced.

The Admiral was tremendous. He towered a full foot over Savage and his heavily decorated uniform was stretched tightly over a majestic paunch. His great jowls moved loosely as he boomed:

"Choon, by the great Galatic Gods. I knew your father on the old Arrano. He was the best Executive Officer I ever had.

"But sit down—you may leave, Lieutenant—and tell me what you are doing here. What happened to your uniform?"

"I was taken by the Terrans." The Admiral's eyes became icy chips. "I have just escaped from a Terran stronghold . . ."

"Have you, by the Eternal Stars," the Admiral interrupted. "Too many of our men have vanished in spite of reprisals, but this is the first definite proof of an organized movement. Where is it?"

"About five hundred ling North in the mountains," Savage said and the Admiral went into action. With his left hand he flipped a switch and a colored relief map of the area sprang into view on the wall, while with his right hand he pushed up a row of communicator buttons.

"Ready three attack units for immediate takeoff," he roared. "I will take personal command. Have my car at gate three."

With the buttons still up he asked. "What

is the exact location?"

Savage moved quickly to the map and examined it closely. After a moment's hesitation he said, "As closely as I can make it, it was zone, three, sector five. It was well camouflaged."

The Admiral roared the location into the communicator and slammed down the buttons. With swiftness surprising for one of his bulk he strode to the door.

"You will come with me in my flagship, Choon. These miserable savages won't give us much of a fight, but it may be of some interest. We'll both be decorated for this."

II

AN HOUR and twenty minutes later the fifteen unit fleet was hovering high over the Canadian Rockies, zone three, sector five. At the Admiral's direction Savage examined the mountain below through the electronic scanners. Although he knew there was no one left in the hidden cavern below him it was an effort to point it out, it had been his home for a long time.

The Admiral barked co-ordinates into the microphone and then barked an order. One ship detached itself from the formation and dived toward the hidden entrance of the cavern, its heat guns burning great swaths through trees and brush. It made a second pass and antiquated anti-aircraft guns opened up, tearing the air futilely.

Savage barely suppressed a start of surprise before remembering that the guns were automatic-radar controlled.

The Admiral roared into the microphone again: "Squadron three cover, one and two land and deploy for attack. Remember, I want prisoners."

As the ships descended the anti-aircraft guns opened up again from their now revealed turrets and as they fired the Trygonian guns blasted them into so much molten scrap. Finally they were completely silenced and the attack ships landed and the soldiers deployed. They were almost to the entrance and Savage was beginning to wonder what had happened to the trips, when an Atomic blast took away the side of the mountain.

The troops and five Trygonian ships went with it.

The Admiral had had within his grasp a stronghold of the resistance and he had lost it. It could be argued that the loss could not have been avoided, but in his service such an argument was not admissible. A full report was sent to Trygon II and both the Admiral and Choon were recalled.

The three ships which first found Terra had been equipped with ordinary Space Drive and had been in space for more than eighteen years. Lacking a radio which would cover the immense distance, one of the ships had taken a second eighteen years to make a report of the conquest. But in the meantime both space radio and Space Warp had been achieved, and forty-five days after the abortive attack they were on Trygon II.

They were placed under house arrest in hotel suites and two days later the Admiral was given a swift trial. He was demoted three grades and then given permission to retire.

Having extracted the penalty for failure from its Admiral the Supreme Command would next turn its attention to erring Fleet captain; capture by the enemy was bad enough, but he had given the information which had led to serious losses. Confined in his suite he waited anxiously for two days more without receiving word and then he received a visit from a Captain Lin.

After identifying himself, Lin said, "You are in serious trouble with the High Commissioner, sir, and not about your capture or the attack on the Terran stronghold. At least, not directly. You had better sit down while I tell you what happened."

"I will stand, thank you," Savage said coldly.

"As you wish, sir. Its hard to believe, but every file and record concerning you for the past two years, as well as the records of the trial have been either destroyed or rewritten. Officially, you are here on leave. And to top it off Ior-Harna was found dead this morning. The evidence pointed to suicide, but it is believed to be murder."

"What?" exclaimed Savage and found a chair.

"The High Commissioner is blowing his jets," continued Lin with thinly veiled excitement. "He doesn't know how it was done, but he suspects that the Empress ordered it. If that's the case his hands are tied,

but in the meantime he'll do anything to get you.

"I have been instructed to advise you to deny everything except that you are indeed home on leave. Incidentally, no one is to know of my visit."

"How about the guards?" Savage asked.

Lin smiled. "I am in command of the guard detail. I must return to duty now, but please remember that you are a person of extreme importance and as such you must be very careful."

Before Savage could reply, Lin turned on his heel and left the room, leaving him to ponder this sudden turn of events. How could anyone change everything so completely, he wondered. If it was on the Empress' order, why should she take such an interest in him? Why should Lin give him the information? Who did he represent?

An hour later a knock on the door brought him out of his private Hell.

THE panel slid open and a Lieutenant in the jet black uniform of the Fleet CID strode in importantly. Behind him came four enlisted men in the same uniform, two of whom planted themselves firmly beside the door with their hands on open-holstered blasters. The other two wheeled in an equipment table.

Savage waited with silent calm while the Lieutenant crossed the room and drew himself to attention. Then he asked sharply:

"What is the meaning of this intrusion? I demand every courtesy of house arrest and this does not fall in that category."

"I am under the explicit orders of the High Commissioner," the officer said icily. "Any complaints should be addressed to him. I have also been instructed to take any necessary action to carry out my orders."

"And what are they?" Savage parried.

"Please be good enough to follow me to the table," the officer said, fingering his blaster. Savage followed.

At the table the officer flipped a switch and from somewhere in the apparatus came a muffled hum. Then a flat plate set into the surface of the table glowed and Savage was instructed to place his hands, palms down, on the plate. He did so and the officer pushed a button.

"You may remove your hands," he said

and bent over a double eyepiece. After adjusting and readjusting a pair of knobs he raised his head and gave Savage a surprised look. He bent down again and made new adjustments. At last he straightened up. His voice lacked some of its former arrogance as he said, "Thank you, sir."

The Lieutenant and his men left without saying anything further and Savage wondered what they had tried to prove with a fingerprint check. Apparently, however, the High Commissioner was covering every angle. The episode gave Savage a momentary feeling of pleasure, which however was quickly replaced by his former doubts.

Several hours passed, during which he had lunch, before a knock again sounded. This time, as the door slid open, Savage could see a double row of crimson-uniformed men, the personal guard of the High Commissioner himself. The guards stiffened to attention as the Commissioner appeared, followed by a group of high ranking officers.

Now what, Savage wondered as he ramrodded his spine and saluted.

The group stopped in front of Savage and the Commissioner didn't bother to conceal his distaste as he announced without preamble, "His Supreme Mightiness, Emperor Hlar, Ruler of the Universe, has seen fit to bestow upon you, Fleet Captain Jarlon Choon, the Order of Trygon."

At the mention of the decoration an officer stepped forward with a flat, gold case. Opening it, he took from it a heavy golden chain, from which depended a jewel encrusted medallion. This he hung about Savage's neck. Then he stepped back into position and the Commissioner went on:

"I am further instructed to inform you that you have been promoted to the rank of Commodore. Commodore Loong here will give you further orders."

Savage's senses reeled from this succession of shocks as the Commissioner turned and strode out with his retinue, leaving only the officer who had presented the decoration.

Loong waited until the door was completely closed and then he laughed uproariously. Savage could only look at him with amazement until he finally stopped and said, "Did you see the look on his face? I think he would almost rather have marooned himself on an asteroid."

"I don't understand," Savage said.

"To tell you the truth, I don't either," Loong replied. "Have you ever been to Court?"

"I was born in Space," said Savage.

"That checks and that's what puzzles me. I have been reliably informed that it was the Empress' agents who caused the alteration of your records. In addition to that, Palace gossip has it that she persuaded the Emperor to honor and promote you. The Emperor was against it. You saw for yourself how the High Commissioner felt. What's the explanation?"

"I have none," Savage replied stiffly.

Loong glanced at him sharply and said, "In addition the Empress expects you at the Palace this evening. Full dress uniform is required, of course. I think you should also wear this." He produced a small, holstered needle gun. "It's not as messy as a blaster, but just as effective at close range. Above all, be careful. You have very few friends."

SAVAGE took the gun and went to his room to change. Things were moving a little too swiftly. Why was the Empress so interested in him? There were a lot of unanswered questions and no immediate way to get the answers. He dressed quickly, strapped the needle gun to his left wrist, and returned to the living room.

"How do you fit in?" he asked Loong bluntly.

"As an officer in the Space Fleet I am under the orders of the Emperor, the Empress and the High Commissioner," he answered evasively. "I have arranged for a car. The driver has his instructions."

"You are not coming?" Savage asked.

"No, but I'll be here when you return. In the meantime I've ordered supper."

The brilliantly lighted Palace was thronged with splendid uniforms and lavish gowns and the main hall was a babble of sound. It stilled abruptly when the name of Commodore Choon was announced. All eyes were on him as a servant guided him across the floor; the women gazing at him with frank speculation and the assembled officers and statesmen with envy or thinly veiled hatred. Loong was right, he had few friends.

He was led up the long, curving flight

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of stairs and the babble burst out anew behind him. At the end of a long hall they stopped before a plain door and the servant rapped lightly. Without waiting for an answer he opened the door and motioned Savage inside.

The Empress was regally beautiful, tall and slim in a sweeping, brilliantly hued gown. Although she was more than twice Savage's age neither her face or figure showed it. She extended her hand as Savage crossed the room and knelt before her. He kissed her hand and she said:

"Rise, Commodore Choon, son of Admiral Choon. Come, sit beside me."

"Thank you," said Savage.

"A long time ago I knew your father very well," she said. She smiled reminiscently and murmured, "Very well. And we too shall know each other well. You are fully as handsome as he was." And so, one question was answered.

He remained with her a long time, and when he retraced his steps to the main hall he found it more crowded than before. Again all conversation ceased as he entered the main hall and he could feel countless hostile eyes on him. He felt decidedly uncomfortable as he crossed the seemingly endless room and he felt himself walking too stiffly. He tried to relax, but instead he found himself pressing the needle gun against his side to make sure it was still there.

Finally he reached the great double doors and he heard speculative murmurs behind him as the footmen opened them. This was the heart of a powerful interplanetary empire and yet it was no different than the courts of Europe during the heyday of the ancient kings.

His chauffeured car waited outside the Palace and in a moment he was speeding down the winding roadway through barely visible gardens and groves. Then they passed the gates to the public highway. As they slowed and turned the corner there came the flare of heat guns.

The glassite windows on the attacked side turned a rosy pink and then went black. The interior of the car became insufferably hot. The chauffeur cursed and trod heavily on the accelerator and the car shot forward. Flame licked at them until they were out of range.

The driver mopped his brow as he said, "It's a good thing she's got full armor. Even so, I thought we'd had it."

"Yes," snapped Savage.

They roared through the now almost deserted streets without further incident. On his guard now, Savage had the little needle gun in his hand when they stopped in front of the hotel. The doorman stepped forward and pulled open the door. He looked into the car and his hand flashed into his uniform. Savage fired.

The gun made no sound, but the doorman gave a choking gasp and fell into the car.

"Quick, sir, pull him all the way in," Savage heard the chauffeur whisper. "There were no witnesses. I'll take care of him."

Without stopping to think Savage followed the chauffeur's advice and dragged the heavy weight into the car while the chauffeur alighted and came around to help him. Finally they closed the door on the body and, still without witnesses, the chauffeur drove it away.

In his suite, Savage found Loong waiting. "Good morning," Loong smiled. "How did everything go?"

"Just fine," Savage replied. "Not only do I have no friends, I have some active enemies."

"You were attacked?" Loong asked calmly.

"Twice," Savage said. "You don't seem very surprised."

"I rather expected it, but you seem to have survived. What happened?"

Savage told him in a few brief sentences and when he was finished Loong said:

"This is better than I had hoped."

"Better than you'd hoped," Savage exclaimed. "What am I, a target for your friends to shot at?"

"They are no friends of mine," Loong answered. "You've been in Space for a long time. I'd better fill you in on recent history right now."

III

IT WAS at that point that Savage was shocked to find that the anger seething inside him was not that of Terran toward Trygonian, but of one Trygonian toward an-

other, or one Terran toward another. He found too that, in spite of the uncertainty he felt about Loong, he was actually beginning to like him. He wondered then if Doctor Phillip's tests were accurate.

"That's better," Loong smiled when Savage sat down. "Here, have a drink and I'll tell you what I think the shooting is about."

Savage took the proffered glass and waited expectantly.

"As you know," Loong began, "Kalnor was Emperor until Hlar, then High Commissioner, staged a coup d'etat. Kalnor and his family were murdered and Hlar proclaimed himself Emperor. Czako, our present High Commissioner, was Captain of the household Guard and was elevated to his present lofty position as a reward for his part in the conspiracy.

"During the years you have been in space our esteemed High Commissioner has secretly been laying the groundwork for a coup of his own. The situation is really quite simple; the Emperor wants to remain Emperor, while Czako wants to become Emperor. Fortunately, at the moment neither seems powerful enough to dispose of the other.

"Now consider the situation as it applies to you. A formerly unknown and unnoticed Fleet captain has suddenly been decorated and promoted on the orders of Hlar himself, and this after records concerning him were altered. He has been invited to the private chambers of the Emperor, where few men are invited. The High Commissioner fears the Emperor and Hlar is jealous of his wife. So . . ."

Loong spread his hands expressively to finish the sentence, but Savage needed no more.

"That's clear enough," he said, "but how do you fit in?"

"I am the faithful servant of the Emperor and his representative, the High Commissioner."

"You said that before," Savage said.

Loong just spread his hands again. Then he asked abruptly:

"What do you think of our planetary policies?"

The question took Savage aback. "What do you mean?" he stalled.

"I mean our policy of immediate conquest and subjugation of any inhabited planet we discover," Loong replied.

"That depends," said Savage carefully. He drank slowly, watching Loong over the edge of the glass.

"On what I think?" smiled Loong. "I know what I think. I want your opinion."

Savage decided to take a chance. "I believe a friendly, diplomatic approach would be a far better method," he said. "For example, in the case of Terra . . ."

"Exactly," Loong interrupted heatedly. "Nothing permanent is gained by force. A conquered people will not remain so forever."

Savage's glass suddenly slipped from his hand. As though from a great distance he watched the liquid splash on the rug and then the room seemed to be receding in the distance. He tried to rise, urgently aware of his dangers, but instead he felt himself collapse. Then all sensation ceased.

He had no idea how much later it was when he awakened in his own bedroom. Other than a slight headache he felt no effects of the drug. He saw that the Trygonian day had come again, but that meant nothing; he could have been unconscious for several days. Then he rolled over and found that Loong was sitting beside the bed.

"I'm sorry I had to do that," Loong said calmly, "but I had to be sure."

"Sure of what?" Savage said, checking an impulse to say more violent things.

"Your sympathies."

"And?"

Loong reached inside his tunic and brought out a needle gun. "Your scientists did an excellent piece of work."

"What do you mean?" Savage asked, and at the same time knew there was no escape.

"I mean that you are a Terran. You betrayed yourself under hypnosis."

Savage knew the bitter feeling of utter defeat. He had accomplished nothing and now this was the end. But Loong wasn't wearing the look of triumph that was to have been expected. Instead he was smiling and he put the gun away as he said:

"I should hate to see you executed. I wasn't just talking last night when I disagreed with our policies. I think a friendly and mutually beneficial relationship can and

should be established between our planets."

"That's fine," said Savage, "but what can you do about it?"

"That remains to be seen," answered Loong. "I propose that we join forces. The fact that you have been able to come this far makes you a worthy ally. And without me you can do nothing. Is it agreed?"

"Yes," said Savage.

"Excellent. I have several matters to attend to, but I will return at six. As a recently returned space officer it will be expected that you enter social life to a certain extent and I think it best that you begin tonight.

AFTER Loong had gone Savage cursed himself for a fool, yet he thanked the gods that he was still alive. Something could still be made of this. A vague, uncrystallized thought was gnawing at his mind. He jumped out of bed and dressed quickly. He was not surprised to find that Loong had left him the needle gun. Without bothering with food he went to the State Library.

His rank carried him into the innermost recesses of the great library, to the guarded tape banks where the most accurate information was to be found. After a quick search of the index he selected two tapes and then took one of the many unoccupied reading booths.

He slipped the first tape, an ancient history of Trygon II to fill the blanks in Choon's education, into the projector, and all thought of time left him as he slumped down in the soft chair before the screen. It wasn't long before he realized that a rough parallel could be drawn between the early histories of Trygon and Terra.

There had been wars and famines and great empires, but Trygon had progressed more rapidly, without the great recessions Terra had known. Three-quarters of a century before the beginning of Atomics on Terra, Trygonian scientists had already harnessed solar energy. At that point the parallel ended.

It was already late when he turned to the history of the Kalnor family. He found that they had ruled for almost a century—first Czur, then Trygon II and finally the System and the Empire. There had been periods when usurpers had gained control, but al-

ways the Kalnors had returned, until finally Klar, determined to put an end to the family, had destroyed them. The tape hinted vaguely that there had been a survivor and then immediately discredited the thought.

Then the tape came to an end and Savage put them both away. Things were somewhat cleared now.

Loong, in a full dress uniform hung heavily with decorations, was again waiting when Savage returned to the hotel.

"What were you doing at the State Library?" Loong asked after they had exchanged guardedly friendly salutations.

"Doing a little checking," Savage said calmly. "I have a theory that I'm working on. By the way, I haven't eaten all day. Will you order something for me while I change?"

"I have already done so. You'll find a fresh full dress in the bedroom. You can tell me about your theory when you're finished."

Savage went to the bedroom and found beside the fresh uniform a belted holster containing a larger version of the needle gun he still wore. As he hefted it the reason for his presence on Trygon II came to him again, and he thought about Loong.

By training and instinct he should have hated him and all Trygonians for what they had done to his people, but he found it a hard struggle to achieve that feeling. He liked and somehow trusted Loong and at the same time he still wanted freedom for Terra. Still pondering the problem he dressed quickly, not neglecting to buckle on the gun, and returned to the living room.

A food laden table awaited him. Loong poured drinks as he entered and gave him one.

"What is your theory?" Loong asked.

"It's not definite yet. I'll tell you when it is."

"Very well," replied Loong. "I want to apologize again for last night."

"I'd have done the same thing," Savage said.

They ate quickly and in silence. When they were through, Loong declared:

"You're in for a treat tonight. I have reservations at the Club Galaxy."

"Oh?" said Savage with polite interest. He had seen or heard the name somewhere,

but it meant nothing to him.

"We'll have to hurry or we'll miss the first show," Loong said, and pushed back his chair. "I have a car waiting outside."

"Armored?" Savage asked.

"Completely."

THE existence of the Club Galaxy was discreetly proclaimed by a small, lighted sign and inside the theme of smallness was continued. Packed into its narrow confines was the highest strata of Trygonian society, uniforms predominating. They were guided to a microscopic ringside table just as the already dim lights dimmed still further.

From somewhere came soft, gentle music and a spotlight went on to reveal a male trio. They sang a song, barely heard over the buzz of conversation, and then bowed themselves out to the accompaniment of a light spattering of applause. Then the lights faded out completely and the spotlight cut off. All conversation ceased and an air of expectancy filled the room.

With an unexpectedness that made Savage catch his breath, the music crashed out in a wild, driving rhythm. The spotlight cut suddenly through the dark and caught a whirling figure in the center of the floor. The audience gave a gasp of appreciation in which Savage shared.

The dancer spun on her toes, a tall, long-legged girl in the briefest of costumes, her long hair flashing in a golden circle. She broke the spin abruptly and danced with flashing feet and writhing body to the wild rhythms. She moved with the precision of a fine machine, yet with the graceful beauty of a wild cat.

She gave a magnificent performance and when the spotlight suddenly cut out, her audience shouted its approval. But when the lights went on again she had disappeared and, in spite of the ovation, she did not return to the floor.

"She never takes a bow," Loong explained, "but you will meet her shortly."

A waiter suddenly loomed large over them and Loong spoke to him briefly and he went away again. They made small talk and presently the waiter returned, bearing three glasses and a decanter of purple liquor. Savage questioned the third glass with the raise of an eyebrow.

"Laharna is to join us," Loong explained. "It is a great honor to be favored with her presence at one's table."

Almost as if summoned by Loong's words she appeared on the opposite side of the floor. She crossed it with the same easy grace she had shown in her dance, her hair flowing gently down over her bare shoulders as she moved. Although she had typically Trygonian features, Savage thought her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He wondered if it was Choon's influence again.

They stood to receive her and Savage found that she was as tall as he.

"May I present Commodore Jarlon Choon," Loong said and Savage bowed.

"Delighted, Commodore. I have heard a great deal about you." Her green eyes sparkled at him mischievously.

"I am honored . . ." Savage began, but a harsh voice behind him interrupted:

"Choon, the Empress' lover, is trying to make another conquest."

Savage spun around, his fists clenched, but Loong grabbed his arm.

"Careful," he whispered urgently, "that's Satish, the High Commissioner's right hand man."

Savage shrugged him off and, remembering the formula, said:

"You have affronted my honor, sir. Who is your friend?"

Attention had been drawn to them at the arrival of Laharna, but this exchange brought all eyes on them. Satish stood up, towering over Savage, and said thickly:

"Captain Droga will act for me."

"Let it pass," interjected Loong. "He is drunk."

"Not too drunk to teach this whelp to respect his superiors," Satish bellowed. "Captain Droga, make the arrangements."

His distaste for the affair evident, Loong reluctantly conferred with Captain Droga, while the two principals stood aloofly silent. In the end it was decided that the duel was to take place immediately on the grounds of the Palace of the Stars. The choice of weapons was Savage's and he decided on needle guns.

Satish and his two companions stamped out and Savage turned to Laharna, who had stood silently by.

"I deeply apologize for causing you this

embarrassment," he said.

She looked at him soberly for a moment. Then she smiled and gave him her hand.

"Until we meet again," she said.

"Thank you," he said and turned away, reluctant to leave her. A lane opened through the hostile faces surrounding them. They walked out quickly and found their car waiting.

"Now you've done it," Loong said as they entered the car. "Satish is deadly with the needle gun. If you lose, the High Commissioner will have my head for being your second."

"And if I should win?" Savage asked.

"I don't know. We may be able to salvage something if I can get to the Commissioner first. But we're not ready yet. The 'Agreet' is just beginning her trials in the morning, and I've had word that you are to be her captain. We must have her if we are to do anything at all."

"And as her captain, you must have me," Savage said.

"Not exactly, but it would be a help."

"We'll have to see what happens," Savage said and relaxed against the cushions.

IV

THEY raced through the crowded streets and then out of the city. A short time later they pulled to a stop on the dueling grounds and found that Satish had already arrived. Savage moved to open the door and Loong said:

"Wait. I'm taking no chances."

He opened a compartment built into the back of the driver's seat and took out a pair of heat guns. He buckled one to his belt and gave the other to the chauffeur with instructions to keep his eyes open.

"All right," he said, "we're as prepared as we'll ever be. I just hope you can shoot straight."

The two parties met in the middle of the field and a further discussion took place between Loong and Droga. The car lights were to provide illumination and their positions were established. Then the guns were examined. Finally Satish and Savage were placed in position with ten yards between them and the guns were given them. The seconds backed away.

"Under the rules you will raise your guns and fire one shot at the count of three," Loong said loudly. "Only head shots are permitted. If both miss, honor is satisfied, and the principals will leave the field. Your guns down, please, I am about to count."

Savage braced his feet and stood relaxed, a light, firm grip on his gun.

"One."

What was the connection between Larhana and Loong, Savage wondered, and what was Loong's plan?

"Two."

He had to go along with Loong, he decided. His comments on the Terran situation presented interesting possibilities. Larhana was the most beautiful woman he had ever known.

"Three."

With a swift, continuous motion Savage swung up the gun, centered the sights and pressed the stud. There was no sound, no sensation, and for a moment he thought they had both missed. Then Satish swayed and crumpled.

Savage lowered his gun. Under the rules he had to remain in position until notified of the results. Others ran to Satish. Loong bent over him briefly and then shouted, "He's dead."

Savage walked toward the huddled group and as he approached, Droga protested.

"That was not a head shot," he said heatedly. "Look, it grazed the chin and entered the neck."

"I beg to differ," Loong countered.

"I insist," argued Droga. "I demand satisfaction."

"I concur with Captain Droga," broke in Satish's second companion. "I will act for him."

"But . . ." Loong protested and Savage interrupted:

"If he insists, he insists. It is his right."

They were quickly placed in position and again Loong counted. At "Three" Savage again swung up the needle gun and pressed the stud. Droga's head snapped back as his shot entered the ground almost at Savage's feet.

Savage remained in position until Loong summoned him.

"There's no doubt about it this time,"

Loong said triumphantly. "Right between the eyes."

"Honor is satisfied," said Satish's second companion and he turned away. He walked a step and spun around, a blaster in his hand. A blaster cut him in half. Loong's chauffeur had kept his eyes open.

Then there came a blaze of heat, this time from Satish's car, and flame burned the grass beside them. Loong's chauffeur turned his attention to the car. A stink filled the air. Loong worked his heat gun and they made their way back to their car behind a wall of fire. They roared away and there was no fire from the other car.

"I didn't think a heat gun was any good for spot shooting," the chauffeur apologized, "so I used a blaster."

"Good thing," said Loong, "or we'd all been fried."

He opened the well stocked compartment and brought out a blaster. "Take this," he said to Savage. "I'll drop you at your hotel and then try to see the High Commissioner. You had better stay in your rooms until you hear from me."

Savage was breakfasting in his room the next morning when the communicator buzzed.

"Loong here," it announced, when Savage answered. "Things have come to a head. I couldn't get to see the High Commissioner, but he has already had an interview with the Emperor. I can only guess what it was about, but I'm told that it was pretty stormy."

"But that's the least of it. The Commissioner has just issued secret orders for your arrest. Go to the roof of the hotel. One of my hilocars is already on its way to pick you up."

"Thanks. I'm on my way," Savage replied, and disconnected. He buckled on the blaster and with a needle gun in his hand he went to the door. The hall outside was empty and he ran swiftly to the service stairs.

On the floor above he ran to the levitor bank and pressed the "up" stud. He watched the indicator impatiently as the levitor shot upward and stopped on the floor below. Then it resumed its upward climb and Savage held the needle gun ready as the doors slid apart to reveal a CID man with

a blaster in his hand.

Savage fired and leaped into the car as the blaster clattered to the floor. The CID man was still crumpling as Savage pressed the stud for the top floor.

When the levitor doors again slid apart Savage jammed them with a blaster and raced up the stairs to the roof, praying that the hilocar would be waiting. It was there and it took off with savage acceleration as soon as he was aboard. Blaster and heat gun fire burned the air as they rose and then it faded out of range.

"Whew," Savage breathed, "that was close."

"We're not out of it yet," the pilot replied. "There's a CID hilocar on our tail."

A glance behind confirmed the pilot's statement and Savage said:

"My hand blaster won't do any good against the stuff they carry. Can you get away from them?"

"I'm using full power, but they're gaining. There's a high powered heater mounted behind you. I'll bring it up."

A SECTION of the fuselage slid open and a long, turret-mounted heat gun rose into view. At the same time the seat back slid down to permit entry into the turret. Savage climbed in and settled himself over the sights.

"All right," he said, "cut your speed."

At full aperture this weapon didn't require supreme accuracy. Savage pressed the firing stud and the other hilocar was engulfed in flame and then it exploded. Savage's pilot dived to ground level and after half an hour of maneuvering between, over and sometimes almost through hills and trees they were deep in the mountains south of the city.

They landed in a mountain clearing. Then the trees in front of them slid apart and they rolled down into a ferro-concrete cavern; the Terran stronghold repeated.

Larhana greeted him as he alighted.

"What are you doing here?" he asked involuntarily.

"I am wanted too," she said. "Hurry, Commodore Loong is waiting for us."

The cavern hummed with swift, orderly activity Larhana led him quickly through it, but Savage had time to note the fighting

ships being readied and the blasters and heat guns being uncrated and loaded. Finally they entered a small room where Loong, alone, awaited them.

"Quite a place you have here," Savage said.

"We've been preparing for a long time," replied Loong, "and now we are going to make use of it."

"How, Prince Kalnor?" asked Savage quietly. His hand was on the needle gun in his pocket.

"The High Commissioner has. . . What did you say?"

"Prince Kalnor, your Majesty."

"How did you know that?" Loong asked. He clutched at his blaster. But Savage brought out the needle gun and he stopped the movement.

"It was evident from the beginning that you were not working with either the High Commissioner or the Emperor, but at the same time it was evident that you were highly placed in a third organization. Then you yourself mentioned the Kalnor family and I went to the State Library.

"With two powerful factions competing for the Empire, it struck me that only the Kalnor name would attract enough adherents to form a third party. It wasn't until a few moments ago that I realized that you were the Kalnor in question; that you would be the leader and not a follower.

"Now that we each know who the other is, I'd like to know exactly what you intend to do about Terra after we've put you on the throne of Trygon."

"I meant what I said the other day," the Prince exclaimed. "Terra will be free. And in time the friendly relationship of which I spoke can be established."

Savage realized that he could use the Prince to bargain with the Emperor, but once he had Kalnor would the Emperor stick to the terms of whatever bargain he had made? No, it was ridiculous to think that he would. He would have to trust the Prince. "That's all right with me," Savage said, and put away his gun. "I'd like to know what's happened, though."

"An attempt was made on the Emperor's life, and at the same time, the High Commissioner proclaimed himself Emperor. Something went wrong, however, and the

Emperor did not die. As a result we have what amounts to war between the two factions, confined to the military and the city of Czur. The average Trygonian citizen won't become involved."

"How about your men?" Savage asked.

"They are adapting to conditions and at the same time spreading a rumor that a Kalnor will come. When I give the signal they will drop all pretense and fight for the name of Kalnor. Now we must hurry to get control of the *Agreet*. A ship is being readied to take us there."

"All right. Let's go," said Savage, the light of battle in his eyes.

"I'm coming too," announced Larhana and they looked at her in surprise.

"It'll be no place for a woman," Savage said. "There'll probably be a battle."

Larhana's green eyes darkened and Loong said, "There's no use arguing with her. If she's made up her mind to come nothing short of a blaster will stop her."

"You're right," Larhana said and they went out together.

LOONG'S ship proved to be one of the latest medium fighters, crammed with firepower and short on passenger space. They found cramped space against the control room bulkhead and blasted off.

Minutes later they were approaching the great Fleet Spaceport, on which rested the tremendous *Agreet*. A minor battle was in progress below them for control of the port, but it was impossible to tell one faction from the other. Loong's radio operator worked his instrument with swift efficiency and the gunners peered into their scanner plates and fingered their controls.

After a suspense-filled eternity the radioman said "Okay" and their ship dived toward the *Agreet*. A port opened in the huge hull and they floated in.

They alighted quickly and a pneumatic car carried them swiftly forward to the bridge.

There they were met by an officer whom Loong introduced as Captain Slan.

"Everything is ready, your Highness," Slan said, careful not to notice the presence of Larhana. "The officers faithful to either the High Commissioner or the Pretender

have been confined. The bare minimum for the operation of the ship remain."

"Very good," said Loong with formal dignity. "Commodore Choon, will you kindly take command?"

"Yes, sir, Captain Slan, you will take off immediately and establish an orbit at three diameters. All screens are to be thrown out as soon as we are clear and any ship that attempts to interfere is to be destroyed."

"Yes, sir," said Slan and he went to the main controls. The ship vibrated strongly for a moment and then they felt it rise gathering momentum as it went.

"We made it," said Larhana, taking Savage's arm.

"Yes," said Savage stiffly, "but we still have a lot to do."

He was very certain now that she had attracted all Trygonian officialdom to the Club Galaxy so that information could be gathered from liquor-loosened lips for Loong, but he didn't know how much further their relationship extended.

The return of Slan recalled Savage to the problem at hand.

"Good news, your Highness," he announced. "Our men have captured the Pretender and are proceeding according to plan."

"And the Commissioner," Loong asked. "Where is he?"

"He is directing the operations of his forces from his offices in the Supreme Headquarters Building, your Highness. What are your orders?"

"He must be destroyed at any cost," Loong said grimly. "An assault would be indicated."

"Screens have been set up to guard the building," Slan said. "The most powerful blaster will not penetrate them."

"We must use the *Agreet's* Atomics then . . ."

"You'd destroy half the city," Savage interrupted. "There's been too much bloodshed already."

"What do you suggest, then?" asked Loong.

"Have you any men in the building?" Savage asked.

"We have not been able to contact any," Slan said.

"Well, perhaps this will work. We will

make a concentrated attack, using the *Agreet's* armed scouts and your fighter. During the attack I can take one of the scouts under the screen, land near the building, and force my way in."

"That might succeed," agreed Loong. "But once inside you'd never find the Commissioner. You don't know the building. I'll go with you."

"I couldn't permit that, your Highness," Slan objected. "Your life is too valuable to risk."

"What . . ." Loong flashed, but Savage interrupted.

"He's right," he said. "You'll have to remain on board the *Agreet*."

"I will go in your stead, your Highness," Slan said firmly.

"Very well," said Loong unhappily.

"I will make the arrangements," said Slan. "We will use number seven scout."

He excused himself and left the group, while Loong turned to Savage.

"I am beginning to understand why we have not been able to completely subdue your people. Tell me, what is your Terran name?"

Savage told him.

"I have studied one of the Terran languages a bit—English, I believe it is called—and it seems that your name is also a word. What does it mean?"

"Untamed," Savage said.

"Aha!" said Loong.

At this point Slan returned.

"We will be in position to launch the attack shortly," he said. "We had best make ready. I beg your pardon, but the lady seems to have disappeared."

"So she has," said Loong after glancing around. "Well, we can't look for her now."

They took another car to their scout ship and exchanged their uniforms for more efficient fighting suits; black coveralls, crash helmets, respirator masks and battle packs.

They were each provided with a heat gun and a blaster, but Savage strapped the little needle gun to his wrist over the coverall sleeve.

"For sniping," he explained.

Loong held out his hand.

"Good luck," he said, and Savage remembered the General.

V

THE attacking fleet, the medium fighter and twelve scouts, roared in over the city and blaster fire came up to meet them. They passed through the wall of flame with the loss of only one scout and then they opened up with their own weapons. The only effect of their combined fire was to make the invisible force screen protecting their target flash and flare.

They made a second pass. Two more scouts went down and Savage decided that they too crashed. He manipulated the controls and the scout lurched sickeningly and went into a steep dive.

At the last possible moment Savage pulled out and, barely off the streets, roared between the buildings toward Supreme Headquarters. He slowed as they approached the building and rested one hand lightly on the bank of blaster studs.

"Brace yourself, we're going in," he said and slammed down on the studs. A chunk of wall in front of them disintegrated and he decelerated savagely. They went through the gap at dead low speed, but still they crashed through two inner walls before they finally stopped. They were bruised and shaken, but otherwise unhurt.

"Here's where we get out," Savage announced and Larhana's voice came from behind them.

"Wait for me," she cried and they whirled around.

From somewhere she had gotten a suit of coveralls that were almost the right size, as well as a helmet and mask. Two blasters were belted to her slim waist and the whole effect was one of efficient deadliness, spoiled only by the loveliness that insisted on making itself known through the coveralls.

"What are you doing here?" Savage finally got out.

"I wanted to help you," she said simply.

"What are we to do?" asked Slan. "We surely can't leave her here."

"She'll have to come with us. Let's go," Savage said, there was no time for argument or recrimination.

He kicked open the hatch and jumped down to the rubble covered floor. Flames were already crackling behind the ship as

he helped Larhana alight, and when Slan had joined them he blasted their way through the wall into a corridor.

With Slan in the lead they ran to the levitor bank. They had just reached it when a pair of doors slid open and black-uniformed men poured out, only to be cut down bloodily by Savage's blaster. The carnage lasted only a few moments and then they were in the levitor.

"Czako's offices are on the forty-fifth floor," Slan explained as he pressed the stud. "They will be thick with his men, of course."

Savage nodded grimly, his weapons ready, and watched the moving indicator. Then, as the forty-third floor clicked by and they were bracing themselves for the rush, a muffled blast rocked the building. The lights went out and they were hurled to the floor as the car stopped abruptly. Then they began to fall.

For an agonizing moment they felt helpless, doomed. Then the safety brakes went on and the car ground to a halt.

"What happened?" Larhana gasped.

"The fire must have gotten to the scout's fuel or blaster magazine and it blew up," Savage said. "But we've got to get out of here."

Slan produced a hand torch while Savage tried to open the doors.

"They're jammed," he said after a moment's effort. "Stand back. I'll use a blaster."

The car filled with heat and smoke and the stink of burning metal came through their masks. Finally he had a man-sized opening and he stuck his head out cautiously. A blaster bolt from down the hall gashed the door above his head and he recoiled.

"Burn a hole through the back while I keep them busy," he ordered and he felt reflected heat from behind him as he filled the hall outside with flame.

A few minutes later he heard Slan whisper from close behind him, "Everything is clear on the other side and Larhana is on guard. As soon as I finish this we can get out of here."

Alternating his attention between the hall and Slan, Savage watched him set a block charge booby-trap with practiced efficiency. Then he was finished and they stepped over the trip-wire and out of the levitor.

THEY ran across the room and as they went through the door a blaster roared behind them. Slan screamed and fell, only his momentum carrying him around the angle of the door jamb. Savage whirled to return the fire and then the block charge erupted and was thrown against a desk.

Protected by the wall Larhana was already at Slan's side as Savage picked himself up. Vainly she was trying to staunch the flow of blood from the clean-cut stumps that were all that remained of Slan's legs.

Savage quickly took two pieces of Plastro-graft from his kit and with them sealed the stumps as Slan ground out between clenched teeth, "You've got to get Czako." He struggled to get up, but fell back into Larhana's arms, sweat glistening on his face.

"We'll take care of you first," Savage said.

"Get Czako," Slan gasped. "Take the stairs. . . Room five leads to office. . . Armored door, use block charge. . . Three blocks. . . Hurry, hurry. . ."

His voice trailed off to nothingness and he died.

Larhana's green eyes were blazing as they cautiously traversed the offices.

At the forty-fifth floor Savage tried the door. It opened and then the frame splintered under the impact of a heavy needle gun. They dropped to the floor, leaving the door ajar. He held his heat gun and blaster together and quickly shoved them through the opening toward the unseen gun and pressed the studs. They roared and a scream answered.

Still on the floor, he twisted his weapons around and bathed the hall with flame in the other direction. Then he scrambled to his feet and with her dancer's agility Larhana followed him. Behind the flame of his weapons they ran down the scarred hall and found office five.

Savage took no chances; he used the blaster on the door and his heat gun was on as they went in. The room's furnishings were reduced to charred ruins, as were the three guards, but after the draperies and papers were consumed there was nothing left to burn.

"Keep your eyes on the door while I get the charges ready," Savage ordered.

He went to the armored door set into the opposite wall and carefully taped on the block charges. Then he set and connected the igniter.

Returning to Larhana, he said, "We don't have much time now. Cover me while I toss a couple of charges down the hall. As soon as they go off, run across to that other office and get under cover."

Quickly he prepared two more charges, setting the igniters for contact. He threw one and it had not yet exploded when he threw the second. The roaring double blast shook the floor and ferro-concrete dust filled the hall. Behind a sheet of flame they raced across the hall. Then, sheltered behind the wall, they waited for the next blast.

Savage was ready to believe that something had gone wrong with the igniter when the roaring thunder came. The rolling concussion lifted them and then slammed them with cruel violence to the floor. They lay dazed for a long moment before they were able to get up and return to office five. This time there was no interference.

The charge had blown in the heavy door and crushed under it was a twisted needle gun and its crew. Of the five other men in the room, only one seemed capable of movement. He made a feeble effort to raise his blaster and Savage cut him down.

They found High Commissioner Czako dazed and bleeding behind his huge desk. Savage hauled him roughly to his feet and jabbed the blaster into his middle.

"You're finished, Czako," he said. "Get on the radio and tell your men to lay down their arms."

Czako nodded in bitter defeat.

IT WAS three Trygonian months later when His Highness, Emperor Kalnor met Savage and Larhana at the great spaceport. Above them loomed the *Agreet*, ready to depart on its voyage through hyper-space to Terra.

"We'll be back someday," Larhana promised.

"Yes," agreed Savage. "I'm as much Trygonian now as Terran, but we want to see Terra on the road to complete reconstruction first. A lot of prejudices will have to be overcome, but in time it will be done."

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have got £32. 10s. Please send two more." B.C. Tredegar, S. Wales.
—Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931

JOAN THE WAD

is the Lucky Cornish Piskey

who Sees All, Hears All, Does All.

JOAN THE WAD is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that Joan the Wad has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.

HISTORY FREE FOR A STAMP.

If you will send me your name and address, a 1/- stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a history of the Cornish Piskey folk, and the marvellous miracles they accomplish. JOAN THE WAD is the QUEEN of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys, and with whom good luck and good health always attend.

AS HEALER.

One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the lucky Well?"

AS MATCHMAKER.

A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has Joan the Wad.

AS SPECULATOR.

A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."



GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER
FROM THE LUCKY SAINT'S WELL

AS LUCK BRINGER.

Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan.'"

AS PRIZEWINNER.

A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize, but I know that——, who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000, he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan.'"

JOAN THE WAD'S achievements are unique. Never before was such a record placed before the Public. Ask yourself if you have ever heard of anything so stupendous. You have not. Results are what count, and these few Extracts from actual letters are typical of the many hundreds that are received, and from which we shall publish selections from time to time. We unreservedly GUARANTEE that these letters were absolutely spontaneous, and the originals are open to inspection at JOAN'S COTTAGE. Send at once for full information about this PROVED Luck Bringer. You, too, may benefit in Health, Wealth and Happiness to an amazing extent.

"SUNDAY GRAPHIC" PICTURE PUZZLE.

No. 175.—"Dear Joan the Wad, I received this week cheque for £71. 8s. 7d. My share of the £1,000 Prize of the 'Sunday Graphic' Picture Puzzle. I have been near winning before, but you have brought me just the extra luck I wanted."—F. T., Salisbury.

WON £153. 17s. 4d. THEN £46. 10s. 3d.

No. 191.—"Genuine account of Luck... since receiving Joan the Wad... I was successful in winning £153. 17s. in the 'People's Word' No. 178 and also the 'News of the World' Xword No. 280, £46. 10s. 3d., also £1 on a football coupon, which is amazing in itself, as all the luck came in one week."—A. B., Leamington Spa.

WINNERS OF £6. 11. 1d.

No. 195.—"My father, myself and my sister had the pleasure of winning a Crossword Puzzle in the 'Sunday Pictorial,' which came to £6. 11s. 1d., which we put down to JOAN THE WAD, and we thank her very much."—L. B., Exning.

WON PRIZE OF £13. 13s.

No. 214.—"Arrival of your charm followed the very next day by the notification that I had won a prize of £13. 13s. in a Literary Competition."—F. H. R., Wallington.

"DAILY HERALD" PICTURE CONTEST.

No. 216.—"Since having received JOAN THE WAD, I received cheque, part share in the 'Daily Herald' Picture Contest, £3. 1s."—M. F., Notting Hill.

£30,000 WINNER.

No. 222.—"Mrs. A. . . . of Lewisham, has just won £30,000 and says she has a JOAN THE WAD, so please send one to me."—Mrs. V., Bromley.

FIRST PRIZE "NUGGETS."

No. 238.—"I have had some good luck since receiving JOAN THE WAD. I have won First Prize in 'ANSWERS' 'Nuggets.' I had JOAN THE WAD in February, and I have been lucky ever since."—Mrs. N. W., Wolverhampton.

WON "DAILY MIRROR" HAMPER.

No. 245.—"I have just had my first win since having JOAN THE WAD, which was a 'DAILY MIRROR' HAMPER."—E. M. F., Brentwood.

WON "NUGGETS" £300.

No. 257.—"My husband is a keen Competitor in 'Bullets' and 'Nuggets.' He had not any luck until I gave him JOAN THE WAD, when the first week he secured a credit note in 'Nuggets' and last week FIRST Prize in 'Nuggets' £300."—Mrs. A. B., Salford.

CAN ANYONE BEAT THIS?

No. 286.—"Immediately after receiving my JOAN THE WAD I won a 3rd Prize in a local Derby Sweep, then I was given employment after seven months of idleness and finally had a correct forecast in Picture Puzzle 'Glasgow Sunday Mail,' which entitles me to a share of the Prize Money."—W. M., Glasgow, C.4.

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